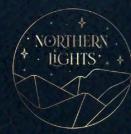


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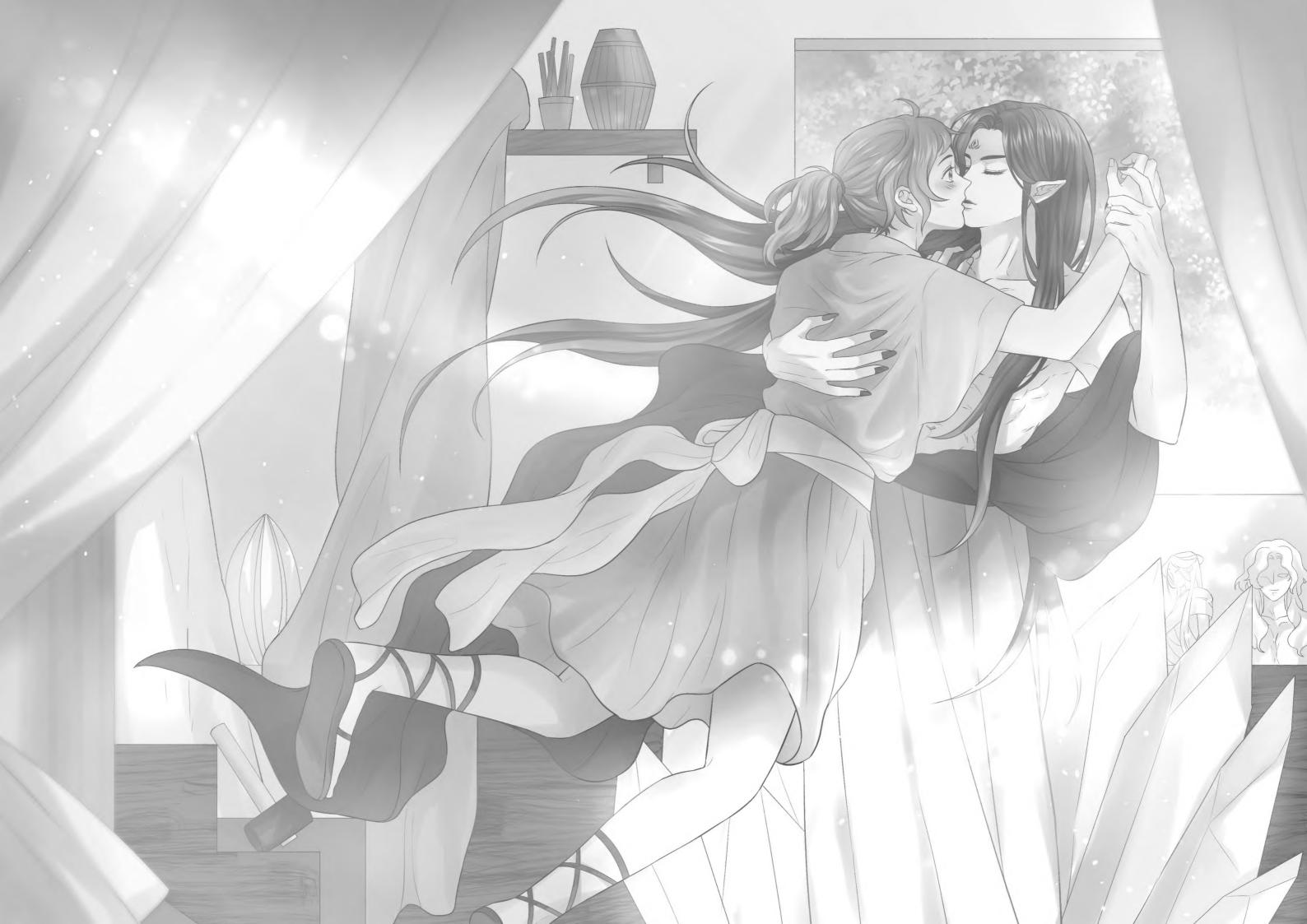
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A LITTLE CAT-ASTROPHE

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei Jun, Shang Qinghua, Linguang Jun

Tags

Mistaken Identity, Romance, Puss in Boots AU, Animal traits, Catboys and Wolfboys

Summary

Shang Qinghua has been a crafty man, but he's never quite been a lucky one. He's got a top five list of the worst things that have ever happened to him and oddly enough, dying isn't even at the top. No, that spot is claimed by the fact that he transmigrated into Shang Qinghua, the slick sect-traitor that he named after himself and had been slated for a dramatic death in front of an audience. And despite all his efforts to live a normal, benign life as a normal, overworked but benign sect leader,, Shang Qinghua finds himself saddled with a mission that dooms him: to sneak into the innermost chambers of the demonic wolf sect and slaughter the great Mobei-Jun.

Author:

ZAN TAGTEAMME

Illustrated by:

PYABMXK

Shang Qinghua has been a crafty man, but he's never quite been a lucky one. He's got a top five list of the worst things that have ever happened to him and oddly enough, dying isn't even at the top.

That spot isn't even claimed by transmigrating into the garbage story he threw away his soul and artistic integrity in exchange for short hemlines, low collars, animal features and sex scenes that were frankly absurd, just so that he could write something that would pay his rent and maybe even land him a television show.

No, the top spot is claimed by the fact that he did not transmigrate into his dark protagonist, a hero that has the ancient blood of literal dragons running through him. Nor did he transmigrate into any of the warrior-like cultivators, the sect leader, or even the radish seller at the foot of the mountain who was written in as a running gag because of how many times his stall got destroyed.

Instead, he got transmigrated into the slick and cunning (but not quite cool enough to rank as the fan favourite) Shang Qinghua, a self-named cultivator with cat ears and a bushy tail that secretly aided the fullblooded demons that threatened the peace of the humans, and was skewered once the demons and the plot no longer had a use for him.

To add insult to injury, Shang Qinghua can't even aid the main protagonist of the main story. A year after said protagonist arrived as a downtrodden child, some other idiot transmigrated into the slender and equally feline Shen Qingqiu, ruining Shang Qinghua's plans to divert his own storyline as an errand boy and a doomed spy, and become Luo Binghe's guiding light.

So instead, he has to do stupid things like balance books, assign allowances from Yue Qingyuan's pocket—while only being able to keep a meager amount for his own peak—and somehow finesse his way into being a sect leader, only to discover that it's the worst possible job given that he has to be the sect leader for *An Ding Peak*, which means he is an errand boy at best.

Shang Qinghua dislikes it but is grateful, he supposes, for staying alive. He's not had to partake in any subterfuge (yet), and he's definitely passed the chapter where he was supposed to be ensnared—practically all his other peers had gotten slaughtered in a trip down the mountain he was supposed to go down, had he not caught a bad fever from slogging through the mud the day before—but he's always on tenterhooks, waiting for his life to take a sharp turn into something even more unpleasant than watching Liu Qingge break his abacus when Shang Qinghua tells him that he's being a little liberal with funds.

Fortunately for Shang Qinghua, his wishes and his worries get answered in one fell swoop, on what is possibly one of the most ill advised missions ever.

He shouldn't be doing this.

Shang Qinghua bites back a hiss as his foot sinks into sludgy, black, and utterly putrid gunk. Something creaks above him and he immediately presses himself alongside the stone wall of the chasm he's currently treading the bottom of. Above, two patrolling wolf-demons chat and walk across a wooden bridge that's slung along the width of the valley. Wolves have rather sharp senses, but luckily for Shang Qinghua, he's so steeped in muck that they don't get a

single whiff of him.

What Shang Qinghua should be doing, ideally, is arguing with Wei Qingwei about what exactly counts as educational expenses. Well—okay, technically, he has the skillset to do this and unlike some other transmigrators, he actually worked towards his cultivation instead of waking up in a fully formed immortal body.

Unfortunately, every now and then, Yue Qingyuan remembers that Shang Qinghua is not only excellent with numbers and making good snacks, but also rather wily and oddly well-informed about the demonic realm and all the strange things that are within it. The sect leader seems to remember it every time there's a tricky task that no one else wants to do.

Once the demons pass, Shang Qinghua continues to edge along the side of the wall, feeling the ridges and dips, trying to remember where he wrote the secret entrance into the tunnel system that runs under the chambers of the demonic wolf's sect leader.

In the original story, this was the sect that Shang Qinghua had been a spy for, until its leader decided he was useless and gutted him in front of an audience. In this life, Shang Qinghua has pointedly avoided that one fateful encounter at the foot of the mountain, and has remained demonicallegiance free.

So far.

Except for last week, when he accidentally let slip during a meeting that he may or may not know the complex cave system that's burrowed underneath the fierce mountain rage that the demonic wolf sect calls home.

So. Here he is, tasked with assassinating the sect leader of the Mobei Clan. The system

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always has a way, he supposes. Shang Qinghua doesn't actually mind the concept of killing the great Mobei-Jun, even though his character design is the one he adored the most. Even if it means Luo Binghe will have one less reluctant ally, at least Shang Qinghua will get to stay alive.

He continues to feel across the stone wall until he finally finds the engraving he has been looking for. Even after two and a half decades in this body, he still remembers all the small details he had written into the story. Shang Qinghua presses the stone and it starts to sink in; a low creaking sound starts to echo. Shang Qinghua looks around frantically, but no one above seems to notice.

When he looks back, the stone has shifted away, leading into a pitch-black corridor. If Shang Qinghua remembers correctly, he just needs to go down here for three li, take a right, hang a left, and climb up a small ladder.

Murmuring to himself, Shang Qinghua steps past the threshold. Instead of a cobbled path, his foot meets thin air.

Shang Qinghua's eyes widen in the dark as his brain catches up with what's happening. He freezes for a moment before he starts to pinwheel his arms and step back. It's to no avail—the stone passage behind him closes, and the sound of it startles him further. Shang Qinghua falls off the ledge he had accidentally walked onto, and drops into the dark abyss.

Except as he falls further, he realizes it's not an abyss. The light of candles starts to drift up, and he sees dots of light forming a square. He realizes too late what exactly he's about to fall into; Shang Qinghua screeches as his body hits the water, blacking out right before impact.

Shang Qinghua is rudely awakened by the sensation of being slapped onto the ground like a fish. He coughs up water and gasps for air, his head pulsing with the impact. Something had been grasping him tight against his waist, but lets go. Shang Qinghua barely notices as he rubs his hand over a drenched face.

He blinks his eyes open and for a moment, registering nothing but darkness with a golden halo. Then he remembers what happened and immediately sits up, his head spinning on its axis as he does so. Shang Qinghua looks around and takes in the sights, realizing that he's fallen into a bathing pool. He sees the candles lining the room, the intricate artwork on the privacy screen, a small table with an incense burner and folded pile of clothes, a naked man standing in the middle of the pool—

Shang Qinghua squawks and immediately scrambles back from the ledge of the pool, his ears perking up as the man looks at him with an incredibly unimpressed face.

The man is tall and well-built, with long black hair and a piercing icy gaze. His ears and tail are as onyx to match, and the blue mark of the demonic wolf clan is etched onto his forehead. He looks like the original draft that Shang Qinghua had for Mobei-Jun before his editors shut it down in favour of a white-haired, blue-eyed model that they thought would sell better. The latter is also the same description Yue Qinguan had given to Shang Qinghua, and Shang Qinghua had lit a small candle for himself in mourning because he had originally modeled Mobei-Jun after his ideal man.

At least someone got the design. Someone

who's most likely going to try and kill Shang Qinghua for intruding, but hey. Little blessings.

"I presume you're lost," the man says, his voice a low rumble. "On your way to the sect leader's chambers?"

"Guh..." Shang Qinghua gawps, feeling his own feline ears pressing back against



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his head. If he wasn't crushing his own tail under his ass, it may have been sticking straight up as well. The other man raises an eyebrow.

"You would not be the first."

The man steps forward, water rippling around him. Despite the fact that Shang Qinghua is squarely out of the water and in his clothes, he still feels incredibly intimidated. "What are you? A secret lover? Lost courtesan? An overeager eunuch?"

"Wh—" Shang Qinghua tries to think up a lie in the face of the man with an arresting gaze.

Maybe running would be the best idea. Yeah. Shang Qinghua tries to leap to his feet but suddenly, a black burst of qi bursts forth from the other demon's palm and whips towards Shang Qinghua. It grabs him and slams him down onto his knees, and he feels the magic force the truth out of his mouth.

"Assassination!" Shang Qinghua blurts out and immediately clamps his mouth shut, trying to fight against the magic. It doesn't work; the other man's power pries his lips apart. "I've been sent to assassinate Mobei-Jun!"

The other man raises an eyebrow. Shang Qinghua would be horrified, if he wasn't busy trying to fight against the spell.

"You know, white hair, eyes like yours, forehead decoration like yours, doesn't work out as much I think, but he smirks all the time—"

The smoke instantly dissipates. Shang Qinghua slaps both his hands over his mouth as his body slumps down. He's so, so screwed.

"Ah," The boredom is gone from the man's voice. Shang Qinghua dares to think it even is mildly amused in a way that a predator would be entertained by its prey. It's lethal and incredibly hot. Man, they really should have gone with his idea for Mobei-Jun's design in the original. "Correct answer."

Shang Qinghua blinks rapidly as he looks at the man.

...Huh?

The man won't give Shang Qinghua his name, and Shang Qinghua tries to be reticent with his own in turn. Unfortunately, the man is rather good at using his powers to extract the truth, so he knows exactly who Shang Qinghua is, who sent him, and what he's here for.

And he wants to *help*. Shang Qinghua has a strong hunch that the demon is just a lesser member of the royal family, bored, and wants to watch someone die to liven things up.

He's taken to the demon's chambers and given a fresh change of plain, earthy looking robes that make him blend in with the rest of the servants. The chambers look ornate with their dark walls and golden paintings, but not very much used, save for the absolutely gargantuan bed in the center.

"Who are you?" Shang Qinghua asks for the tenth time in as many minutes, and the man gives him the same impassive look one would give dirt on the road. Shang Qinghua hates how good it looks.

"A close relative," the man says smoothly, and Shang Qinghua immediately freezes

in the middle of wrapping a brown cloth around his head, hiding his ears. It's the most the man has divulged and while Shang Qinghua knew he must be part of the family, he didn't expect the man to be in the inner circle.

Though he could also be bullshitting. The man rolls his eyes as he throws something in Shang Qinghua's direction. It's a small satchel, similar to the one the other servants have hitched around their waist.

Shang Qinghua tries once again to scour his brain and figure out who the hell this is. He tries once more and asks as politely as he can, "Is there anything I shall address you as, sir?"

The man pauses and stares off to the side contemplatively, before looking back at Shang Qinghua. For the first time in the very short amount of time they've known each other, a corner of the man's mouth quirks up.

"You may refer to me the same way you refer to other lords."

It's an incredibly arrogant statement to be making to a peak lord, however, it's clear that the man doesn't think Shang Qinghua counts.

Great.

Shang Qinghua has probably found himself trapped in a powerplay between two relatives. He hopes that at least if they're caught, Mobei-Jun will cleave this man in half before they get to them.

...Ha! As if. He's dead meat. Yet Shang Qinghua is not quite ready to resign himself to that fate.

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To Shang Qinghua's utmost surprise, the man is not lying about helping Shang Qinghua kill Mobei-Jun. Not as far as he can see.

The man sends away his servants and lays out an intricate map of the palace on one of his desks. He taps a finger against the drawing, the silver ring around it glinting in the lamplight.

"I can bring you up to here," the man says, tapping on a small drawing of a... Shang Qinghua cannot quite figure out what that is. A latrine maybe, knowing his luck. "There's a tunnel behind the altar in this room. From there, you can access his chambers."

"And then what?" Shang Qinghua asks, and the man gives him a look like he's stupid.

"Then you kill him," he says slowly, and Shang Qinghua grimaces. He was hoping this man could at least give him some sort of enchanted blade or magical poison like a good NPC should.

Well, maybe it's a good sign. Maybe Shang Qinghua doesn't need a blade bathed by dragon's blood, or a potion made from the seed of a blossom plucked under a waxing moon to kill Mobei-Jun. Maybe he can just shove his sword in and hope for the best.

And a few hours later, that's exactly what he sets out to do. Thankfully, it wasn't a latrine that the other man had pointed out, but an old, musty unused room that smells as bad as one. The statue on the altar almost crumbles as Shang Qinghua pushes it and sure enough, the secret passage behind it leads into the sect leader's chambers.

Shang Qinghua enters the shadows of the rooms and finds the man lying in repose over a bed of ice, arm draped over his bare stomach as he sleeps. He's a lot leaner than Shang Qinghua would have ideally liked him to be. He originally wanted Mobei-Jun to be built more like his unwanted ally, but—

Right. He's here to kill someone.

Shang Qinghua tiptoes gingerly through the dark room, blade in hand. The moonlight is obstructed by shutters but thankfully, Shang Qinghua is able to see well in the dark. Unfortunately, that also means he sees the litany of grotesque monster heads mounted across the walls.

Shang Qinghua makes it as far as the bedside of the great Mobei-Jun and stares for a moment at the man lying down. White hair fans out like a shroud around him, and even resting, his features seem more serpentine than wolfish. They're more pinched than Shang Qinghua likes, but gorgeous nonetheless.

Sighing, Shang Qinghua raises his dagger, preparing to plunge it down.

Mobei-Jun wakes up, his hand shooting out. Shang Qinghua squawks and leaps back, but not before a clawed hand wraps around his throat and starts to squeeze. He feels his ears and tail spring up as eerily blue eyes stare at him, his body under too much sudden shock.

Before he can even struggle though, two fingers press against Mobei-Jun's temple from behind. For a moment, he continues to choke Shang Qinghua, but then his eyes roll back in his head and he slumps away. The figure beside him catches Mobei-Jun and cautiously guides him back down on his bed. Then the figure turns to Shang Qinghua, looking decidedly unimpressed save for the twitching corners of his mouth.

Shang Qinghua's tenuous ally strides over

and Shang Qinghua immediately tries to scramble back. He's not fast enough; the other man grabs him first by the wrist, then by the waist, then hauls him upwards, slinging him over a broad shoulder.

"Great work," the man comments dryly as they step back through the secret passage. Shang Qinghua isn't exactly fighting to escape his hold, but he does aim a good kick here and there. The man pinches his thigh in warning and Shang Qinghua curses him.

Suddenly, a hand yanks his tail and Shang Qinghua immediately clamps his mouth shut, holding back a small yowl at the fleeting heat that passes by. Why the hell did he have to be so audacious with the world building!

"What the hell?" Shang Qinghua manages to hiss, and the man snorts.

"Is this the best that Cang Qiong can send?"

"Yes," Shang Qinghua replies indignantly, even though the answer isn't quite necessarily correct. The man doesn't deposit him down until they've reached the musty prayer closet again. When Shang Qinghua's feet hit the ground, a hand reaches over to tweak his ears, which elicits an indignant sound from Shang Qinghua as he bats the hand away.

"Why didn't *you* kill him?" Shang Qinghua demands in a heated whisper, and the other man raises an eyebrow. "Isn't that what you want too?"

The other man stares down Shang Qinghua, and Shang Qinghua meets it with equal challenge. Well, part fear and part challenge, but the challenge is there. The man huffs and this time, Shang Qinghua is too slow to stop him from pinching the base of his ear. He jumps and yelps, not entirely proud of the sounds.

"Where would be the fun in that?" the other man says, and Shang Qinghua barely has time to be indignant before he is being dragged out of the room and into the darkness once more.

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The second attempt fares no better. Even though the man deems the first one disastrous, he tells Shang Qinghua that there may be just enough competence in him that he'd like to help him out. This time, he's a little more helpful at least, sneaking Shang Qinghua into the private kitchens of the sect leader and slipping him a small vial of poison.

Trained from his days as an An Ding disciple, Shang Qinghua blends into the kitchen bustle well enough. He's tasked with finishing a strange looking bright purple dish, and Shang Qinghua does it as half-heartedly as possible. It doesn't really matter if it's good as long as Mobei-Jun has at least a bite of the main dish.

When no one is looking, Shang Qinghua manages to slip a few drops of poison into the braised meat that will have the spotlight in today's meal. A few moments later, a well-dressed servant takes it away without a second glance. As soon as all the food's been carried away, Shang Qinghua sneaks out of the kitchen, tossing his apron into a dark corner.

He sneaks up a stairway, ducking and avoiding the guards where he can, and silently sneaks into a small closet that has a second door, one that opens up into the gallery overlooking the private dining hall. Below, all the dishes are laid out on three tables. He arrives just as Mobei-Jun

sits with a flourish at his table, the sleeves of his robes billowing everywhere and the necklaces strung across his bare chest glinting in the light.

Shang Qinghua sweats as he watches the servants flitter around the man, arranging the food in a manner that's most convenient for him to take. In the distance, three seated musicians play a gentle, unobtrusive song. Shang Qinghua grimaces; he had written Mobei-Jun as a more austere man than this, one who did not appreciate the finer things.

Ah, well. This world has already gone off the rails, and Shang Qinghua can't afford to miss anything because he's busy trying to remember his old author's notes.

He's tense the entire time he watches Mobei-Jun eat his first appetizer. Shang Qinghua's ears and tails are pinned, mostly because he doesn't want *that* man pinching them again, but also because they'd give his mood away too easily. It feels like Mobei-Jun takes a hundred years to slowly taste all the dishes, and Shang Qinghua clenches harder with each one.

Finally, he thinks Mobei-Jun is going to reach for the main course, the glistening braised meat soaked in some poor demon's blood. Instead, Mobei-Jun reaches for the dish that Shang Qinghua had made. Shang Qinghua freezes as Mobei-Jun picks up a very burnt giblet that Shang Qinghua had put no thought into cooking, a giblet that's dripping in weirdly purply sauce that Shang Qinghua had also put no thought into blending. He frowns, thin white eyebrows pinching together, then pops it into his mouth.

And promptly spits it out.

"... What is this?" Mobei-Jun says. He does not yell, but his voice is so cold that even Shang Qinghua gets chills from where he's standing. A servant immediately rushes over, but Mobei-Jun stops them with a raised hand and takes another bite.

He makes a retching sound and immediately whips the dish off the table. *Rather dramatic*, Shang Qinghua thinks as the ceramic shatters against the floor, and Mobei-Jun finally raises his voice.

"Who cooked this?" he roars to the hall at large, making everyone cower. "Who dared defile this palace with a dish this—this undignified?"

Uh oh.

"My appetite is ruined," Mobei-Jun announces, standing up as a combined chorus of apologies and knees hitting the floor in a penance ring out across the room. He sounds extremely irritated as all the other demons in the room immediately prostrate.

The shivering servant quickly bows and scurries away, shortly followed by Mobei-Jun storming out of the room. The plate of poisoned meat remains glistening and untouched, much to Shang Qinghua's dejection. Shang Qinghua slinks back towards the room of his secret ally while in the kitchen, one of the servants carrying the food back sneaks a bite from the main dish. Not wanting to risk facing anyone's ire, all the other demons in the kitchen decide to use the poor servant's corpse as a scapegoat.

Despite his failures, the man colluding with Shang Qinghua does not get frustrated and try to kill him. Instead, the man simply

snickers and waves the servants out of his chambers, before gesturing at a table filled with food. Shang Qinghua blinks for a moment before he realizes that he's being asked to sit down and eat. It comes at the same pace as last night's realization, where the man had pointed towards a layer of blankets on the floor and Shang Qinghua realized it was where he was to sleep.

"You aren't very good at this, are you?" the man asks, and Shang Qinghua grumbles into the bowl of noodles he's been given. It's surprisingly aligned to a normal person's tastes, and not as red and bloody as whatever the other man's been eating.

"It was only my second try," Shang Qinghua points out then hastily adds, "My lord."

His companion simply snorts and takes a sip from his cup of wine. Shang Qinghua would be lying if he didn't say that even like this, the man is equal parts terrifying and attractive. He slaps himself on the inside, and tries to get himself to focus because this man can very well kill him.

Yet, he doesn't even try, even as Shang Qinghua's assassination attempts continue to fail. He aims a poisonous dart at Mobei-Jun, just to have him turn in time, and the dart sinks a poor guard instead. An attempt to poison the wine doesn't work, as the wine turns out to be used for worship and not consuming, and neither does sneaking into his chambers at night, given that Mobei-Jun is a surprisingly light sleeper.

Every failed attempt sends Shang Qinghua slinking back to his temporary chambers with his tail tucked between his legs, his unimpressed roommate waiting for him.

"Surely, your sect must wonder what's taking you so long," the man says, reaching over to tweak Shang Qinghua's ears as the latter enters the chambers. Shang Qinghua

is too vexed to even reply with an indignant protest. He's barely even thinking of Cang Qiong right now, too annoyed that he's not been able to succeed in his task.

...Maybe Shang Qinghua shouldn't be taking this whole assassination attempt thing seriously. After all, what did they expect, sending an accountant out for a task like this!

Wolfish hands are still fiddling with his ears, and a blush is rising up Shang Qinghua's cheeks. He belatedly realizes what's happening, and ducks out of the way. The

man takes an opportunity to grab his tail instead and tugs, causing Shang Qinghua to yowl and jump back.

"Hey!" Shang Qinghua exclaims, grabbing his hind end and curling his tail out of the way. "I'm not your pet!"

The man stares at him for a moment, his stormy eyes boring down on Shang Qinghua. Then he *laughs*, a deep mellow thing that makes the blush on Shang Qinghua's face grow stronger.

"Aren't you?" he says with a small, crooked smile before turning on his heel and retreating further into his chambers. It's not till a good five minutes have passed that Shang Qinghua realizes he's been rooted to the same spot, gawping at where the man had been standing just now.

Damn it!

Maybe collaborating with someone who looks like he walked out of a very detailed wet dream hasn't been the smartest of Shang Qinghua's choices, despite the fact that he didn't really have any say in it. It doesn't help either, that the man seems as equally fascinated by Shang Qinghua as he is interested in his mission.

Every time Shang Qinghua fails an assassination attempt, the man is waiting in his chambers with an amused smile. He likes to poke and prod Shang Qinghua's ears and tail, and is only more entertained when Shang Qinghua tries to swat him away. Sometimes, Shang Qinghua wonders if the other man is just stringing him along for his own amusement before he decides



to skewer him.

The original goods had a fate somewhat like that and technically, Shang Qinghua is colluding with someone from the demonic sect so it would stand to reason. But one part of Shang Qinghua's hindbrain catches the wolf demon looking at him and thinks, does he want to eat me? and starts to short circuit in a way it can't recover from. And then, something happens that cements the fact that Shang Qinghua is truly screwed:

There is a banquet to greet some lesser demonic royalty or the other. Shang Qinghua glazes over when the man explains what for, but he gleans that it would be the perfect opportunity for Shang Qinghua to carry out an assassination. Demonic banquets tend to be loud and raucous, and a mousy thing like Shang Qinghua should be able to sneak a dagger into Mobei-Jun's side. Shang Qinghua points out that he's actually feline, then points to his ears, which leads to Mobei-Jun humming in contemplation and reaching out to tug on them, much to Shang Qinghua's chagrin.

So Shang Qinghua dresses in the most nondescript clothing he can, blending in with the other servants as the opulent party begins. He spends the first little bit pretending to carry out duties and trying to maintain his attention span through the mind-numbing boredom of someone else's celebration, all while keeping an eye on Mobei-Jun. He's too surrounded by people at the beginning, everyone eager to greet him. Eventually though, when a flurry of servants descend to add more food, Shang Qinghua finds an opening. He's quick with his dagger but he only gets as far as the tip touching Mobei-Jun's side, before he finds himself suddenly slammed across the royal banquet table, Mobei-Jun's icy blue eyes staring down at him in an unimpressed manner.

Damn those demon reflexes! Shang Qinghua belatedly realizes he's still holding a poison-tipped dagger in his hand, and drops it like it's hot.

"My king!" Shang Qinghua tries meekly and the hand around his throat squeezes. Mobei-Jun looks like a ghoul now, his skin so pale it's translucent, his white hair tied into a clean topknot. Shang Qinghua's vision starts to go black and his tail whips back and forth, thumping weakly against the table.

"Let him go," calls a cool and familiar voice, and briefly, the grip around his neck turns positively *crushing*.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mobei-Jun barks; the banquet hall has gone quiet around him, the servants skittering back into the shadows.

"I thought it would be fun," Shang Qinghua's friend replies blandly, and Shang Qinghua can't believe that *this* is how he dies. After all that effort he put into not perishing at Mobei-Jun's hands!

But to his surprise, Mobei-Jun simply scoffs and lets Shang Qinghua go. Shang Qinghua immediately scrambles off the table and thinks for a moment to grab the dagger, but then comes to his senses. He scans the room frantically and sees that his friend is not too far away, sitting idly in deep blue robes, a thick black fur stole draped around him. The man looks even more regal now; Shang Qinghua had been so hyper-focused on his task that he didn't even notice the other man slip in.

Shang Qinghua scrambles to where the man is, and cowers behind him. The man simply looks at Mobei-Jun with some amusement and Shang Qinghua prays he makes it out alive. Then Mobei-Jun says something that tilts his world on its axis.

"It is tactless to do it at a banquet with guests," Mobei-Jun says. "Better things are expected of your name, Mobei-Jun."

Shang Qinghua calcifies on the spot, unable to move.

"Yes, Uncle," his friend—Mobei-Jun—says.

...Uncle?

That means Shang Qinghua has really been after...

"Next time, make it more interesting. I'm sick of having to constantly replace servants," Linguang-Jun says casually, like his nephew trying to kill him is just another day. Perhaps it is. The real Mobei-Jun gives a smile back that blankets the entire room in a chill. With the exception of Shang Qinghua who, kissing his last survival instinct goodbye, feels his stomach flip instead.

In retrospect, this *would* be something that happens to Shang Qinghua. The original goods was a sly and cunning know-it-all. Shang Qinghua is an intelligent know-it-all too, but instead of being sly and cunning, he's just here to survive. He curses the ancestors of whoever misinformed Cang Qiong on Mobei-Jun's looks for the thirtieth time in as many minutes, as the real Mobei-Jun reclines on his daybed, idly watching Shang Qinghua.

"You're still here," Mobei-Jun says, and Shang Qinghua swallows. Why was he saying this like he was allowed to leave in the first place? Shang Qinghua hadn't even gotten the grace of dismissal, or the privilege of being thrown in the dungeons! Instead, he has to stop his eyes from drifting to where Mobei-Jun's shirt is parted, revealing his pale but sculpted chest, and has to pretend his body isn't having some poor revelations on how it reacts to fear.

(The answer is badly. Whatever thing this incident has dragged out of Shang Qinghua's id and has used it to send messages to the lower half of his body, Shang Qinghua needs to kill it with fire.)

"Of course, my lord," Shang Qinghua says weakly, and Mobei-Jun simply hums. He seems amused by the entire thing—of course he is. He must have had a great time watching Shang Qinghua flail at one attempt after another at assassinating his uncle. No wonder Shang Qinghua never got his full name while they had been conspiring together.

Mobei-Jun rises to his feet slowly, and stalks towards Shang Qinghua. Shang Qinghua tries to appear cool, but his tail is tucked squarely between his legs, and his ears are pinned back. His hands tremble, ready to throw themselves up in his defense; though he's not sure how good they will be against the great Mobei-Jun.

Shang Qinghua gulps as the man draws close, looming over him. Shang Qinghua gives him a feeble smile, and wonders what the best way is to hug the thighs of the man who knows you've been sent to assassinate him. Mobei-Jun places a hand on Shang Qinghua's shoulder, and looks down at him. Despite the fact that he is not smiling, he looks pleased anyways.

"I am glad this changes nothing between us," Mobei-Jun says, squeezing Shang Qinghua's shoulder meaningfully. The only problem is, Shang Qinghua is unsure of what the meaning is.

"Y-yes?" Shang Qinghua tries, and Mobei-

Jun finally smiles. His canines glint sharply in the low light of the room, and he reaches up to touch Shang Qinghua's ears once more. This time, Shang Qinghua doesn't stop him. Mobei-Jun traces a claw through the soft fur, and Shang Qinghua involuntarily shivers.

"Good," Mobei-Jun says, voice low and rich. "Get some rest. We have a few things to prepare for."

...

... Wait, prepare for what?

·····

Turns out, the thing Mobei-Jun so casually referred to was his *ascension*.

Linguang-Jun has no real claim to the throne; he had tried to secretly kill Mobei-Jun, but only succeeded in sending him very far away. Mobei-Jun had only arrived back to his palace a few days before Shang Qinghua had shown up and once he twigged onto Shang Qinghua's misinformation, he decided to see if Shang Qinghua could take the work out of his hands. In the meanwhile, he's been coldly cordial to his uncle, who insists on holding onto the throne while Mobei-Jun "readjusts".

Shang Qinghua's luck is so poor that not only has he found himself in the middle of all of this, he has been tasked with guarding Mobei-Jun from Linguang-Jun's attacks while he completes his ascension ritual in the cold chambers of his ancestors. Mobei-Jun is currently laying on a slab of ice, absorbing the energy of the hundreds of rulers before him while Shang Qinghua sweats, trying to maintain the large spiritual

fire he has set up as a barrier around them. Linguang-Jun circles the fire, spouting some sort of villainous monologue that Shang Qinghua remembers getting absolutely butchered in the live-action adaptation of his novel.

Just getting here had been a trial and tribulation. Mobei-Jun and Linguang-Jun had a catastrophic fight in the grand hall, one that brought the walls down around them. Shang Qinghua had, in the interest of self-preservation, hid behind as many pillars as he could, watching Mobei-Jun beat the hell out of his uncle. After Linguang-Jun had gotten crushed under a fallen portion of the roof, Mobei-Jun had found Shang Qinghua, picked him up by the scruff, and hauled him down to the ancestral chambers.

"For protection," Mobei-Jun had said. "It is a way for future consorts to prove themselves."

Shang Qinghua doesn't really understand why he's there then, but he hasn't really been able to find a plan of escape. Nor, admittedly, has he tried, though he probably should have had. They had descended down into the chambers, and Mobei-Jun had begun the ritual. Surely enough, five minutes after he had gone completely under with the magic, a bruised and annoyed, but mostly intact Linguang-Jun had appeared.

"...And that is why the throne belongs to me, and not this little whelp," Linguang-Jun finishes with a flourish, and Shang Qinghua makes a non-committal noise. It's especially rich coming from Linguang-Jun, who's both leaner and shorter than Mobei-Jun.

"The throne is his," Shang Qinghua grits out, hands up as he continues to feed his powers into the fire. Linguang-Jun looks decidedly unimpressed with him. Probably with reason because not long after, he breaks through Shang Qinghua's barrier.

Shang Qinghua does his best to defend Mobei-Jun— he really does. He fights Linguang-Jun with his all, even getting in a petty slap here and there. The red marks against the man's pale face are rather satisfying to see. Shang Qinghua sends a blast of spiritual energy that seems to break Linguang-Jun's arm, something he only revels in for a few moments before Linguang-Jun grabs him with his other one and flings him so hard against the wall that it cracks behind him.

In that brief initial burst of mind-numbing pain, Shang Qinghua wonders if Mobei-Jun had meant that he would take Shang Qinghua as a consort. He would like that, he thinks rather deliriously. His first order as a royal consort would be to hang Linguang-Jun upside down by his toes for at least a solid month.

"Maybe I should get rid of you first," Linguang-Jun says coldly, all grandeur vanishing from his voice. "You're a rather annoying pest."

Shang Qinghua is about to bite something back when there's a sharp whistling sound. The entire room goes dead silent for a moment, before a giant blast of blue light bursts from the side, throwing Linguang-Jun back a considerable distance. The smell of burnt hair and clothing fills the air and before Shang Qinghua can lift his head to see where the man's landed up, a freshly ascended Mobei-Jun kneels down, leaning over him.

"Are you okay?" Mobei-Jun asks; he's got blood coming out of the corner of his lip, and chaotic yet incredibly powerful energy swirls around him. Shang Qinghua nods wordlessly, and Mobei-Jun presses his hand to Shang Qinghua's forehead.

"Good," Mobei-Jun says, wiping the blood off his lower lip. It's an incredibly hot look,

and Shang Qinghua resigns himself to the thought. "You've proved yourself."

Shang Qinghua blinks repeatedly, and Mobei-Jun frowns and asks him if he's got something in his eye. Shang Qinghua gawps for a moment as his brain flickers to what Mobei-Jun had said about future consorts, and squeaks out a, "Proved myself?"

"Yes," Mobei-Jun says. "Anything you wish for now, you may ask from me."

"Oh," Shang Qinghua says. Maybe he just gets a favour or something for helping Mobei-Jun out. He should be relieved, but for some reason, he feels a little disappointed. Mobei-Jun reaches down and picks up one of Shang Qinghua's aching hands; he lifts it up and presses his lips against the knuckles, before looking down at Shang Qinghua, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

"As your spouse, it will be my duty to fulfill it."

Oh.

Then Mobei-Jun leans down, bringing their lips together before Shang Qinghua's brain can catch up.

Of course, Cang Qiong Mountain hasn't actually forgotten about Shang Qinghua. No, they remember him, and they have actually been mounting an expedition to come retrieve their favourite bookkeeper from the clutches of the demonic wolf clan.

Shang Qinghua finds this out five minutes after Mobei-Jun presses their lips together. As they're on the ground, as the man paws at his robes and kisses him roughly while

Shang Qinghua tries to surreptitiously pinch himself and see if he's dreaming, there's a sound of a commotion in the distance. Neither of the two realize until the doors to the ancestral chambers burst open to reveal the peak lords of Cang Qiong, many with their swords drawn and ready to fight.

"...You have got to be kidding me." The voice is filled with both amusement and astonishment, and Shang Qinghua immediately realizes they have company, shoving Mobei-Jun away. He doesn't manage to get him too far away because Mobei-Jun looks up at the intruders, ears up and eyes glowing, fangs bared.

"I told you he was okay!" Qi Qingqi huffs beside Yue Qingyuan, whose eyes are desperately looking for a place to land anywhere but on his didi who he thought was in dire straits. A bored Liu Qingge asks, "Can we still kill them?"

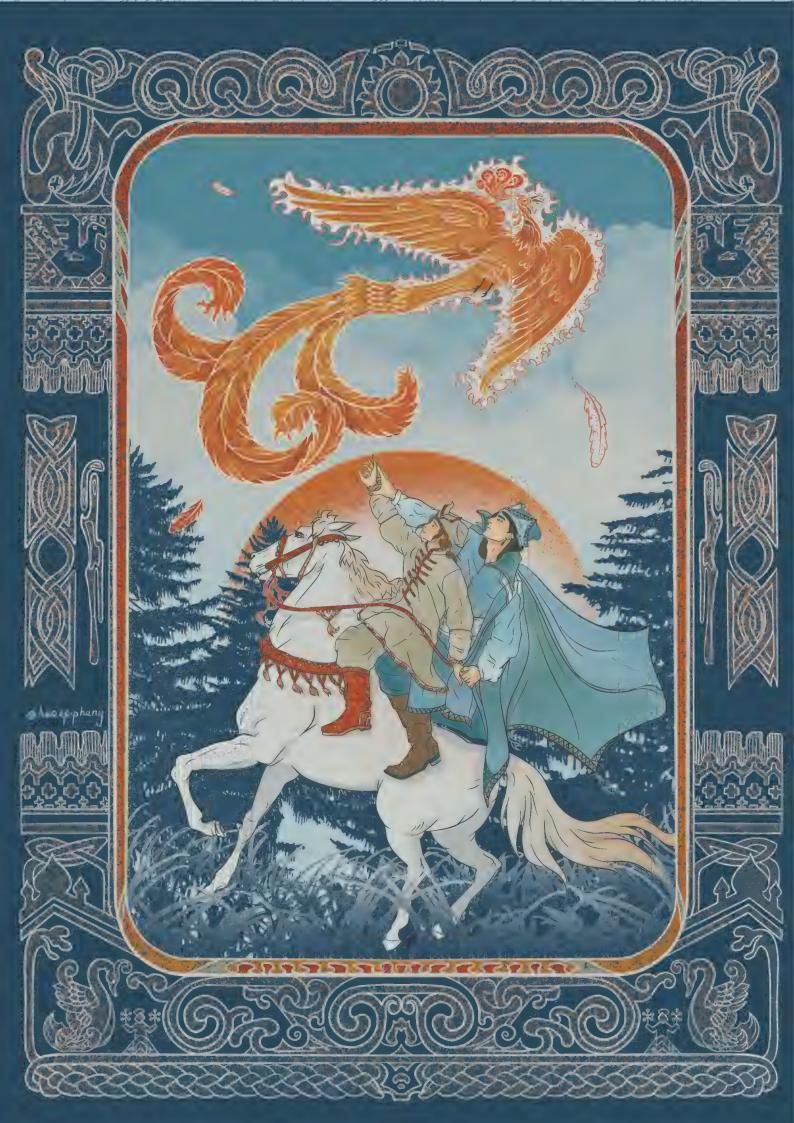
Perhaps the most egregious reaction though is from Shen Qingqiu, who peers over a fan with wicked mirth in his eyes. Shang Qinghua groans, and slumps back on the ground, letting his head hit the cool stone floor in hopes that it'll knock him out.

Well.

At least his family will be here for the wedding.







CONSEQUENCES

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/Shang Qinghua

Characters

Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun

Tags

fluff, mild crack treated seriously, soulmates

Summary

Shang Qinghua is one of the most powerful sorcerers in the realm. Set him on a problem, and it will be solved in a matter of days. Rumors spread like wildfire about his power, how both humans and demons all eventually succumb to his will. There is no one who can stand in Shang Qinghua's path.

Except for himself, apparently. As it turns out, the S in Shang stands for scammer, because Shang Qinghua doesn't have an ounce of magic in his body.

For humans, it is a wonderful, cherished thing to receive your soulmate. Knowing that you'll be loved, that there's someone there beside you—the magical powers are but a bonus on top of that.

Unfortunately, it is quite the tricky thing to lie about.

Author:

OYFF

Illustrated by:

OTTISTRY

Mobei-Jun's palace is cold.

It shouldn't be surprising to Shang Qinghua, but it's the only thing he can even think about. As he walks down the hall to the throne room, his fingertips are starting to hurt, his teeth can't stop chattering, and all-in-all, he's absolutely miserable.

And completely and utterly fucked.

Shang Qinghua is one of the most powerful sorcerers in the realm. Set him on a problem, and it will be solved in a matter of days. Rumors spread like wildfire about his power, how both humans and demons all eventually succumb to his will. There is no one who can stand in Shang Qinghua's path.

Except for himself, apparently. As it turns out, the S in Shang stands for scammer, because Shang Qinghua doesn't have an ounce of magic in his body. All those rumors? Yeah, he spread them himself. All that "succumbing"? Only because people don't seem to understand the effect only a few nice words have.

Heck, Shang Qinghua wasn't even the one who said he had magic in the first place! The only way humans can get magical powers is by making eye contact with their soulmate—a sweet and romantic concept to be sure but—Shang Qinghua is lonely. And single. Honestly, Shang Qinghua should be flattered that anyone would think there's someone out there who loves him, but at the same time...

Everyone's! Expectations! Are! Too! Damn! High!

And now, the Mobei-Jun wants to personally commend him for all the work he's done for the kingdom...

Shang Qinghua is doomed. It's over. He

should have faked his death and run away when he had the chance.

He's never even met the man; Mobei-Jun has only contacted him through external means, so why does he want to see Shang Qinghua now?

Finally, he reaches the large double doors of the throne room. The marble is cool at his palms, and the possibility that his sweat-coated hands are going to stick rises in his mind. Fortunately, or unfortunately, they don't, and Shang Qinghua walks forward with his head down, staring intently at the carpet. He can somewhat make out the whispers of demons around him, but he's much more focused on trying to not trip.

The pressure is really starting to get at him now. He can't breathe. Each step towards where Mobei-Jun must be sitting hurts, so much so he drags his feet.

Honestly, it feels like something inside of him is about to burst, which isn't nice! At all!

"This servant humbly greets his king," Shang Qinghua mumbles, kneeling onto the floor. Should he say anything else? Maybe he'll just wait.

Mobei-Jun hums, his voice deep and rumbling. "You may rise," he says eventually, and Shang Qinghua unfortunately has to oblige.

He starts to get up, one foot at a time. Shang Qinghua does his best to keep his gaze on the ground for as long as possible, but his eyes flicker up to meet Mobei-Jun's cold, icy ones and—

Snow shoots out from Shang Qinghua's fingertips. As frost scatters down the floors and up the walls, the newly born Sorcerer just stares at the king, who, even on his lofty

throne, has an expression of surprise that mirrors Shang Qinghua's own.

On one hand, that's pretty funny. On the other, oh no.

How many other ways can Shang Qinghua describe exactly how doomed he is? Such brazen displays of power, so close to Mobei-Jun, have got to be seen as an insult, right? Power that Shang Qinghua barely has any control over, seeing as how he just got them.

And! The reason why that is! Must be! Because he and Mobei-Jun are—are...

Soulmates.

Theoretically, that's a great thing. Shang Qinghua isn't alone! There's someone out there meant for him! He doesn't have to live a lie anymore!

But the only reason why he has this magic is because he met the one person who can't know he was once powerless... If Mobei-Jun found out that Shang Qinghua had basically been lying to him all this time... then the natural end result would be...

The title of soulmate wouldn't help Shang Qinghua at all. In fact, it's much more likely that even if Shang Qinghua hadn't been lying the whole time, and their first meeting had no other context to it at all, Mobei-Jun would still kill him.

After all, who would want a puny, embarrassing, average-looking human as a soulmate?

Mobei-Jun's eyes return to their narrow forms. "You. What is the meaning of this?"

Shit.

"Well-I, uh. Hmm."

"Speak clearly."

Think, Qinghua, think! He all but scrambles to his feet, painting his face with a confident smirk. He totally has this in the bag. If Mobei-Jun is the King of the North, Shang Qinghua is the King of Bullshit. "It's simple, my King."

Mobei-Jun tilts his head. "How so?"

"Um. All of these people..." Shang Qinghua motions towards their audience, most of them with frost crawling up their bodies. He should probably do something about that, but he has absolutely no idea how. Whoops. He's got to practice with these newfound powers later. "All of these people, including you my King, were scared—"

"This King does not get scared."

"—Startled, were you not? Do not think I was ignorant to those mocking words and blatant stares on the way here. Everyone had underestimated me; after all, how dare a pathetic human walk the halls of such a fine, powerful demon king such as yourself? Which is why I had thought to prove myself in more...straightforward ways, as it seems my record of successes was not enough."

Mobei-Jun taps his fingers over his armrest, clearly thinking. He just hopes the king is thinking about how great he is, and not about how nice he would look skewered by a sword. "These past accomplishments have no mention of such magic." Shang Qinghua's body runs cold. "Or any magic, rather. What is the explanation for this?"

"That's another easy question to answer!" Laughing in hopes to calm his nerves, Shang Qinghua waves around his hand dismissively. "No smart man would ever reveal the extent of his abilities, especially not for petty squabbles. That tribe in the southeast, planning to rebel—of course I

had used my magic. Seeing those guards frozen to the ground, having no choice but to watch me saunter over to their leader; how laughable! But while I could have slaughtered them all, it's simply not my place to do so. I much prefer to act subtly."

Shang Qinghua bats his eyelashes. Mobei-Jun does not look amused. "Yet there is still the admission of power that has been kept secret."

"...Correct. But this servant would never betray you, my King. I can only hope that the nature of my abilities only acts as proof of my loyalty." And not as proof of any other kind of connection, Shang Qinghua wants to add.

"Very well then. In recognition of these services, a reward is due to be granted."

Is it over? Is he finally free from this torment? Shang Qinghua really just wants to grab his reward and go—and this reward better be worth it for all of the mental anguish he's been through. He's not expecting a sunny, beachside villa, but it's gotta be something good.

Like money. He will very gratefully accept money.

"It is only right that you accompany this King."

That doesn't sound like a cash reward.

"W-What?" Shang Qinghua blinks incredulously. What is that supposed to mean? Accompany Mobei-Jun where? To jail? Was none of his sloppily spewed bullshit effective? "My apologies, could you repeat that? Where should I...accompany you, exactly?"

"Everywhere." The corner of Mobei-Jun's lips tilt up, and the expression really shouldn't be so attractive while Shang Qinghua's in a state of terror.

Everywhere? The word bounces around in his mind, repeating itself over and over again. Everywhere...

"Shang Qinghua has pledged his loyalty. He should act on it. This should be Shang Qinghua's greatest wish, unless those prior words were nothing more than lies."

They were definitely lies. His loyalty amounts to nothing more than a lone drop in the icy seas but there's no way to claw his way out of this one. Of course, spending more time with his soulmate should be great! Emphasis on the word should, though, because in any other situation, spending quality time with a potential romantic partner should not be shadowed by the looming threat of death.

"Is there no other-"

"Come," Mobei-Jun beckons towards a servant, before looking back at him. "Take Sorcerer Shang Qinghua to his new quarters. And as for you...I expect to see you early tomorrow."

"Ah... Of course, my King."

It's freezing.

He's tucked in his—admittedly very soft—bed, rolled up in blanket after blanket, but he's still shivering. It could be assumed that after gaining some control over the domain of ice, it would come with cold resistance, but apparently not! In the last twenty-four hours, he's got magic, a soulmate, a sweet new room, and a load of responsibilities, but absolutely no warmth.

"It's a complete scam," he complains to the open air. "It's not fair." Sure, your soulmate being one of the most powerful beings in the land was cool and all, but he's got none of the benefits and all of the detriments. Theoretically, it shouldn't be impossible to be soulmates with a demon, but when the telltale sign of soulmate-hood was the acquisition of magical abilities, something that demons already have in abundance, what was the poor human supposed to do!

They would get called a scammer! Which Shang Qinghua very much was, but still! He just wants to curl up and cry, but it seems very likely that the tears would just freeze on his face.

"Sorcerer Shang Qinghua?" A knock at the door kicks him out of his pity party. "Master Mobei-Jun expects you in twenty minutes. Please convene in the throne room."

Twenty—?

Shang Qinghua falls out of bed, trapped in his blanket roll of doom. "Uh... Right," he says, praying that the servant outside didn't hear the thump of his ungraceful landing. "I'll be there. In twenty minutes."

"...Of course, Sorcerer Shang Qinghua." It seems like his prayers were for naught—the servant's tone turns almost pitying. "The assigned attire is outside the door. It was also assumed that you do not need help dressing yourself; however, there will be no issue with calling more—"

"No! No, it's fine, I'm fine, don't worry about me," Shang Qinghua blurts out, scooching himself upright. The less people around him, the better, even if his reputation is certainly going to be shattered once the servant starts to gossip. "Thank you for waking me up. You may leave now."

The servant says nothing else, and Shang

Qinghua manages to heave a sigh of relief, squirming his way out of his blanket cocoon. He peers up and down the hallway as he grabs his clothes, and thankfully it seems his venue will more often be empty than not. Helpful, as one sighted mishap may lead to certain doom.

It's too much to expect from him to not mess up.

The garb is simple, the only differing element from the servant's uniforms being the light gray-blue color and finely woven texture. Which makes enough sense, as Shang Qinghua is only slightly more useful than any given servant.

His thoughts drift to the ensemble he could have been wearing if he had come out as Mobei-Jun's soulmate, if the demon had accepted him as such. Maybe his outfit would have been white and blue, carefully embroidered and stitched together, with details that might have shimmered in the light—

Or not! Maybe he would have been shoved in prisoner's garb and left to rot in jail either way, it's time for him to go. Just thinking stupid little thoughts took so much of his time, that Shang Qinghua has to tie his belt and pat down his hair as he sprints to the throne room.

Practically sliding in, Shang Qinghua spots Mobei-Jun waiting, expression looking mildly miffed.

Which is fair enough—Shang Qinghua had spent so much time yesterday droning on and on about how loyal he was and how useful he could be, and it all accumulated into him being late for his first day of work. "...Good morning, my King?" he asks the words tentatively, unsure if it's the right thing to say, or if he really shouldn't have said anything at all.

"Is that a question, or a statement?" Mobei-Jun's words are, unsurprisingly, cold.

Shang Qinghua shuffles his feet. "I... Good morning."

"Incorrect." Mobei-Jun raises an eyebrow. "If it was a 'good morning', as Sorcerer Shang Qinghua phrases it, then this King would not have to be waiting for his subordinate to arrive. If it was a 'good morning,' then this King would not be seeing his subordinate looking as if he ran into..." His gaze drifts down to Shang Qinghua's collar, and the... rather untasteful expanse of skin. No doubt the fastener had undone on his rush here, and Shang Qinghua quickly buttons it back, eyes wide.

"Pl-Please forgive this servant's indecency, my King!" he wails, ready to collapse and grovel on the floor at any moment. "Wait—I have no desire for forgiveness—I shall throw myself upon the ramparts if that is what is wished of me, and let myself wallow in my mistake. I only ask that the punishment may be merciful and—"

"Sorcerer Shang Qinghua."

"Y-Yes?"

"Stop talking." Mobei-Jun waves his hand, the space shattering like cracked ice as a portal forms. "It would be unwise to keep demonic leadership waiting."

"...Yes, my King."

The meeting is informative, boring, and downright terrifying. Despite Shang Qinghua being officially announced as Mobei-Jun's own, personal Sorcerer, the

demon leaders are looking at him either like a mildly interesting toy or—as some demons murmured—a particularly tasty morsel.

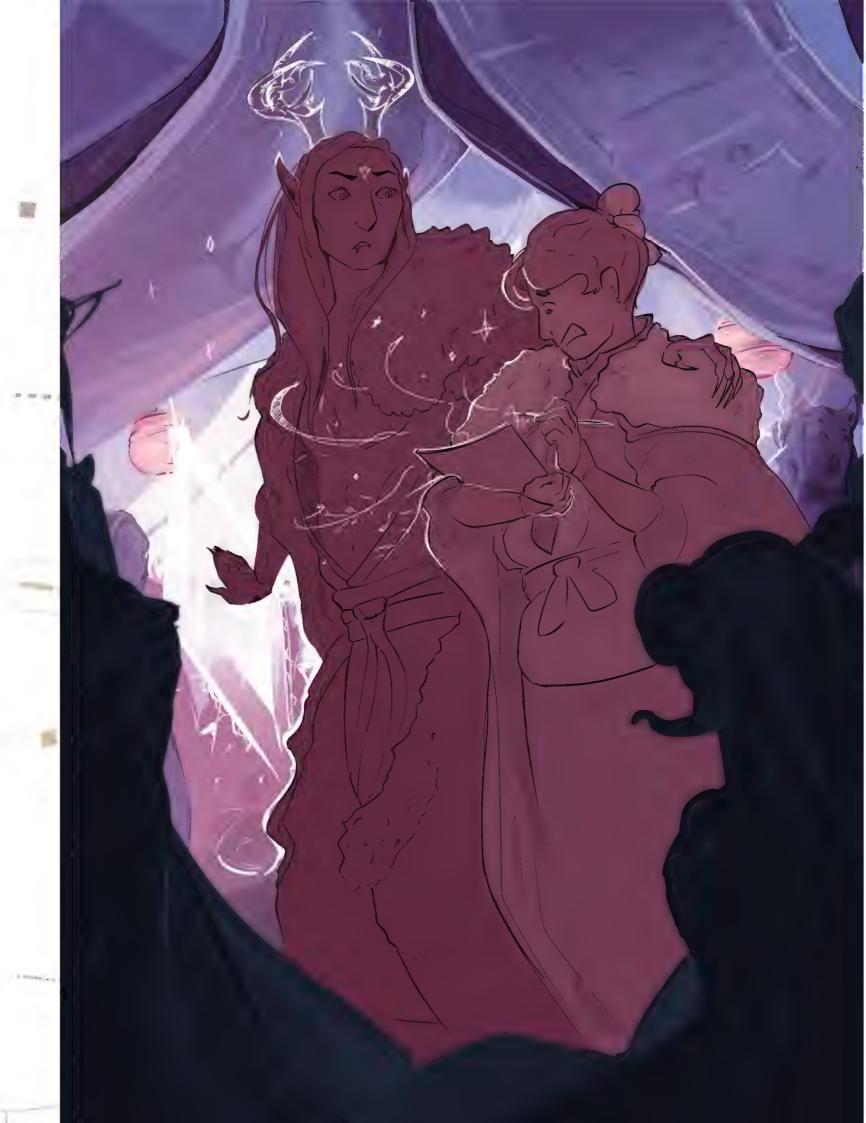
The first part is understandable—compared to the demons around him, Shang Qinghua is like a stuffed toy; meant to be prodded and tossed around without care, but tasty? No way. Shang Qinghua is all skin and bones, totally gross and not worth eating at all! Sure, he's maybe a little special with his magic, even if he can barely control it, but other than that there's nothing!

So will these demons please just leave him alone? Shang Qinghua's doing his best to write notes, as there's some valuable information here—not necessarily the contents of the meeting, but rather the associations between everyone. Unfortunately, between the hierarchy and relationship maps, are little notes that might not serve as much help in the future: This demon commander would serve me fried. This one would eat me alive. This one would braise me in soy sauce and with a side of rice.

Thankfully enough, the meeting seems to be wrapping itself up. Maybe even these demons got tired of arguing amongst themselves—

"Mobei-Jun," the demon that wants to fry him purrs. "Tell us a little about your new pet. It's about time you've gotten yourself a cute sorcerer, although..." Her gaze turns dangerous. "I heard that this was the one causing trouble in my territory not too long ago."

"Perhaps if you had taken better care of your subjects, then there would have been no trouble at all," Mobei-Jun says. "Don't think about laying a claw on my subject. Surely you wouldn't appreciate it if your own Sorcerers had a...surprise visit."



"Fine, fine." She clicks her tongue. "But they're so cute when they're scared. All clinging to each other, unable to leave each other alone. How adorable—it makes them so easy to use." Her head tilts as she looks at Shang Qinghua. "Where's the other one? Your partner."

Shang Qinghua freezes. "I'm sorry?"

"Don't you Sorcerers come in pairs? Your soulmate, or whatever term humans give it. Was Mobei-Jun too cheap to take in both of you?"

"Ah, that's..." Shang Qinghua and Mobei-Jun lock eyes, the latter gesturing for him to explain. Shang Qinghua racks his brain there's no way he can just tell the truth, but his lie can't be intricate enough to raise eyebrows, or worse, have someone look into it. "It's complicated."

She furrows her brow, before her expression morphs from understanding to sheer mirth. "Do they not like you anymore? That's so—" Almost all the demons are coming close to breaking down in laughter, their fangs looking especially sharp. "That's pathetic. Mobei-Jun, you might have found the one Sorcerer despised by their own partner!"

Despise is a bit of a strong word, Shang Qinghua wants to argue. Mobei-Jun probably doesn't despise him, he's just a bit indifferent. Which might be worse, some people would say. The opposite of love is apathy, after all, but that's better than hate! Either way, Shang Qinghua doesn't say anything to disprove the demon—if they all come up with their own conclusions, then there's nothing else Shang Qinghua needs to do.

"Perhaps so," Mobei-Jun murmurs, squinting his eyes at Shang Qinghua, searching. For what, Shang Qinghua doesn't know. "How interesting."

Please, my King! He wants to shout. Just brush it off!

Instead, Shang Qinghua smiles wryly, with an air of assured resignation. "This servant could only be pleased that these demon lords find entertainment with his personal affairs... Despite the lack of skill in the love department, this servant should not be doubted when it comes to the problems that truly count."

"Good answer, good answer!" the demons chortle, and Shang Qinghua does his best to fight his instinct to run away, body stiff.

But a cold hand on his shoulder keeps him in place. "This meeting is over," Mobei-Jun declares. "Everyone has had enough of their fun." The portal appears, and Shang Qinghua is all but dragged back in.

They don't talk about the meeting after that.

Not that they should; nothing of importance was really brought up, but the notion of soulmates isn't mentioned around Shang Qinghua. Actually, Mobei-Jun rarely talks to Shang Qinghua after that second day. His schedule goes back to almost normal, taking on missions and jobs from various demons and even humans under Mobei-Jun's domain.

Some jobs are dangerous, and are fitting for Shang Qinghua's title—stopping rebellions, espionage, diplomacy. His methods remain the same as before, using his words and trickeries rather than his magic. But it helps! It's much easier threatening people with shards of ice rotating around them, ready to

strike at any moment.

Other jobs are more...benign. Herding stray beasts, clearing fields, even babysitting for other workers—it seems more like Shang Qinghua is a common servant, rather than the King's esteemed Sorcerer, but it's all fine with him. Sometimes, Shang Qinghua can feel as if he's being watched, but nothing comes of it. That can only mean that Mobei-Jun hasn't found out about anything suspicious, and Shang Qinghua is free to live his life.

Is he a little disappointed? Maybe. As the looming threat of death feels farther and farther away each day, Shang Qinghua starts to long for something more. It's easy to dream about—being soulmates could only mean that everything should work out in the end, but he's still hesitant about their relationship. The title of "soulmate" can only mean so much to demons—they theoretically don't gain anything objective—only feelings, and to Mobei-Jun, such feelings are nothing more than useless.

So all Shang Qinghua does is hold onto these daydreams, never expecting—

"Sorcerer Shang Qinghua," Mobei-Jun says one day, while Shang Qinghua works peacefully, the only worry on his mind being the dilemma of having either rice or noodles for dinner. "You should contact your ex-partner."

"Of course my King, I can do that—" Shang Qinghua's head whips up, almost spilling all of his ink, eyes widening in horror. Oh no. Have they finally arrived? The consequences of his actions? "...Is there any particular reason why, my King?"

"..." It takes an exceptionally long time for Mobei-Jun to respond, the demon king's features twitching almost imperceptibly. "Does Sorcerer Shang Qinghua need a reason why? Will he no longer listen to this King's orders dutifully?"

Vehemently, Shang Qinghua shakes his head in disagreement. "That isn't it at all, my King. This servant was simply surprised that Mobei-Jun would take interest in such a small, petty detail."

My King! It's really none of your business, so—

Well, it technically is, but there was absolutely no need for Mobei-Jun to know that!

"There is no need for Sorcerer Shang Qinghua to think too deeply about these matters. Your King simply wishes to satiate a mild curiosity; nothing more."

"Of course, my King." Shang Qinghua wants to cry. Mobei-Jun has never shown interest in anything relating to Shang Qinghua. If he wanted to be curious about anything, then why couldn't it have been paperwork? "What should I contact him about?" If it's something small, then it shouldn't be too much of a hassle to deal with. As long as Mobei-Jun doesn't ask to meet this "soulmate", then everything should be—

"This King wishes to meet the one who Shang Qinghua has as a soulmate."

Fuck. If it always wasn't so damn cold, Shang Qinghua would be sweating bullets. "Is—Is that so, my King? You really wouldn't want to. He's not great. Horrible person to be around, really."

Instead of growing bored and leaving Shang Qinghua to his work, his words only seem to incite the King further. Mobei-Jun towers over Shang Qinghua, a fire raging in his eyes, despite the impassive face he wears. "Shang Qinghua's soulmate...does not appreciate him?"

"Appreciate? I'm sure he does," Shang Qinghua desperately tries to form words, deciding that ultimately, sticking as close to the truth as possible will be best. After all, the lies might get mixed up, and having even more suspicion from Mobei-Jun is the last thing Shang Qinghua wants. "But even if he appreciates me, it doesn't mean that he loves me, you know? It's hard, but I'm fine with it. I'm completely content. Love isn't really something that I need, nor want, anyways, and especially not from a soulmate that doesn't feel the same. Maybe if things were different, but they just aren't, right? So it's fine. Everything is great."

""

Shang Qinghua bites his lip. He really ran his mouth, like an idiot. His King will probably throw him to the wolves for how casual Shang Qinghua was. "I'm sorry, my King. That was a lot of extra information."

"Sorcerer Shang Qinghua need not worry. This information will be incredibly helpful. Is Shang Qinghua's soulmate..." Mobei-Jun hesitates for a short second. "Is Shang Qinghua's soulmate successful? Wealthy? Powerful? Attractive?"

My King, where do your priorities lie?!? Choking a little bit, Shang Qinghua quickly clears his throat. "I suppose that's the case. Definitely successful, and incredibly wealthy. And his power knows no bounds; there is none who would dare challenge him. As for attractive..." Shang Qinghua's gaze darts to Mobei-Jun's face, the demon still looking quite disgruntled."Yes. I would say so."

"This King understands." Mobei-Jun mutters something under his breath, before smiling—smiling!—at Shang Qinghua in a way that's probably supposed to be reassuring...but isn't at all. Mobei-Jun moves over to the doorway. "There is much

work to be done, then. Sorcerer Shang Qinghua should not worry. Your King will handle everything."

"Ah...okay." Shang Qinghua is absolutely going to worry—there's a reason why he handles logistics, even if his newfound ice powers should put him closer to the



front lines. Mobei-Jun's style is efficient yet bold, which is perfectly suitable on the battlefield, but not for things that require a more delicate touch. Except, Mobei-Jun did say not to worry, and Shang Qinghua is quite proud of his loyalty...

Shang Qinghua puts the issue out of sight, and out of mind. It probably has nothing to do with him, anyway.

"My—My King!" Shang Qinghua cries out as he slides into the throne room, skating on the thin sheet of ice he forms in front of him. It's a special little technique he's been working on, copying a lot of the younger ice demons who play out in the halls. On top of being fun, this method was incredibly efficient, with Shang Qinghua learning how to move at incredibly high speeds. It makes life incredibly easier, especially when needing to rush to a scene of emergency, much like the horrific mess happening right now.

"Just... Just what exactly is the meaning of this?"

Shang Qinghua flutters around the poster in his hand, crinkling from both how frantic his waving is and under the force of his grip. It's been haunting him for the entire morning, and now, a few hours after, Shang Qinghua finally works up the courage to confront Mobei-Jun.

At short glance, the poster seems rather innocuous. Shang Qinghua hadn't thought much of it at first, until he read the text.

To the Fool who claims himself to be Sorcerer Shang Qinghua's soulmate. You are hereby summoned to the court of Mobei-Jun. Prove yourself, and you shall only be banished to the ends of the world. Fail to do so, and fall to the blade.

Do not run, or be branded as a Coward who has no place by Shang Qinghua's side.

Why!!! Why is he being mentioned!!! Why does it sound so—so embarrassing! He has no part in this!!! Shang Qinghua just wants to live his silly little life and do his silly little jobs, and not be roped into his King's silly little interests!!!

Mobei-Jun looks extraordinarily proud of himself, the corners of his mouth curling ever so slightly. "Sorcerer Shang Qinghua," he calls out, dismissing the other servants in the room. As they all but dash away, they look at Shang Qinghua with a mixture of both schadenfreude and pity. "You have finally arrived. This King was wondering when you would see him."

Oh, were you now? I wonder!!! Why!!! Shang Qinghua is close to losing it—he takes in one, two deep breaths to compose himself, before smiling with the fury of a mildly inconvenienced hamster. "Mobei-Jun, my King, this servant by no means wishes to be disrespectful, but what exactly are these posters? This servant has seen them lining the halls, and every human and demon passing by holds them in their hands. Your lowly servant has noticed that he happens to be featured, and would very much like to know exactly what is happening now."

"Mmmn. Sorcerer Shang Qinghua has no need to be worried about his insolence. This King is more than willing to provide the answers Shang Qinghua seeks." The demon King steps down from his throne, chill approaching Shang Qinghua at the same pace his King does. Mobei-Jun places a light hand on Shang Qinghua's shoulder; Shang Qinghua shivers, but whether it's

Consequences Consequences

from the close proximity or from the literal cold, he isn't sure.

"My gracious King," Shang Qinghua murmurs, "why are you doing this?"

"Sorcerer Shang Qinghua has been an invaluable asset of this kingdom." The praise sends warmth all throughout Shang Qinghua's body—his ears must be terribly flushed by now. "Time and time again, Shang Qinghua has proven both his worth, and his loyalty. Which means your King must do one last thing."

"One last thing?" Tilting his head, Shang Qinghua furrows his brow. "And what exactly is that?"

"Tying up loose ends." Mobei-Jun squeezes Shang Qinghua's shoulder gently; the Sorcerer freezes up, unable to breathe.

Are his eyes shaking? The world feels like it's spinning. Loose ends? That could only be—

"Again, Sorcerer Shang Qinghua has no need to worry. Your King will handle every little thing."

"Right... Right. Of course, my King. I have something I need to do right now. Many apologies from this servant." Shang Qinghua takes a step back. And then another. One more—but he slips on the ice he had created only minutes ago. Mobei-Jun, with worried eyes, reaches out to grab him, but Shang Qinghua twists out of the way—he crashes on the frost, but quickly scrambles to his feet.

He all but flees the hall, ignoring the commotion behind him. What... What??? What is he supposed to do now??? Shang Qinghua could continue to do nothing, and let this all play out, but staying complacent is what landed him in all of this in the first place. If he stayed silent, sure, everything might be fine for a little while longer, but the chance of Mobei-Jun figuring out his lies would grow more and more each day!

The best solution, unfortunately, would then be...

• • •

Shang Qinghua should start writing his will.



It's fine, Shang Qinghua! It's going to go great! Mobei-Jun isn't going to care at all that you lied to him for months! He'll be perfectly fine with it! Shang Qinghua paces back and forth in the small storage room he's asked his King to meet him in, wringing his hands in anxiety. It's not the most preferable spot to die in, but at least he wouldn't be dirtying any of the nice halls with his corpse—if Mobei-Jun is going to hate him at the end of it, it at least won't be for the clean-up.

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"Sorcerer Shang Qinghua," Mobei-Jun says, as he opens the door. "Why have you called this Lord here? Has that vermin initiated contact?"

"M-My King!" He's here sooner than Shang Qinghua had thought; now there's no time left for him to think of the seventh way he'd die today. "Ah, about that...there's... something this lowly servant has been hiding from you! A terrible, horrible secret—this servant completely understands if you despise him at the end of this, but he has just one request. This servant only hopes that his hard work may prove him worthy of such a vile thing... If my King may have the mercy of killing your pathetic servant quickly and easily, so that no suffering is done, then that may be—"

"-Shang Qinghua."

"Ah."

Mobei-Jun holds up a hand, Shang Qinghua quickly shutting his mouth in response. The demon closes his eyes for what feels like a moment too long, before revealing his gaze, more frigid than Shang Qinghua remembers. "What exactly is this secret Sorcerer Shang Qinghua has been hiding?"

"Yes—! Well, you see, about my... soulmate..."

"Has the situation changed? Sorcerer Shang Qinghua, perhaps what you mean to tell your King...is that your feelings for your soulmate remain romantic? Even after everything that has happened in your life"—Mobei-Jun's brows furrow—"do you still love this person?"

Hahh??? Mobei-Jun, do you even know what you're saying??? Shang Qinghua's voice comes out as a squeak. "I suppose that's the case?"

Despite the lack of response, the temperature rapidly dropping in the room tells Shang Qinghua all he needs to know. He's not lying—in fact, he's probably telling the truth more than he ever has since he came to the palace, so why does it still seem like everything is still spiraling out of control? "... My King?"

Mobei-Jun doesn't say anything.

"You're actually my soulmate."

"... What?" The king looks at Shang Qinghua like he's grown a third head, which is a perfectly normal reaction to have, of course, but Shang Qinghua would still prefer more than a one-word answer! This problem has been plaguing his mind for what feels like forever, and all Mobei-Jun has to give him is a simple "what"?

"So I was completely lying about the whole 'having a soulmate thing'—well, not completely lying." Shang Qinghua's panicked laugh devolves to a trill. "I still have a soulmate; it's just that I totally made up that person, since my soulmate is... you. It's you! Yay? Or maybe not a yay—it's definitely not a 'yay' for you with me as your soulmate, but it's a good thing for me, since you're so cool and handsome and powerful

and really, really handsome—did I mention that? I think I did. Considering that this conversation is not going very great, so I completely get why you're looking at me like that—oh. Oh, my King, this servant has many apologies for you; not only have I abandoned all of my respect suddenly, I have done so at the worst time, your servant pleads that—"

A firm hand rests on his arm, another reaching up to brush away the crystals of ice forming in the corners of Shang Qinghua's eyes. "Breathe. Do not worry."

"Ah—" Shang Qinghua sniffles, nodding once. When exactly did he start crying? "Yes, my King."

"Good." Mobei-Jun's thumb rubs slow circles on Shang Qinghua's cheekbone.

From what Shang Qinghua can glean through his tears, Mobei-Jun's expression is complicated, contemplative, but not at all hostile. Instead, he almost seems ... pleased? Perhaps the sight of Shang Qinghua crying was entertaining enough to quell any immediate desires of bloodshed.

"Take all the time Shang Qinghua needs to calm himself."

"...You're not mad, my King?" Murmuring, Shang Qinghua shuffles his feet. "This servant has led you on with the worst of lies and countless amounts of deceit. These actions deserve the harshest of punishments."

"Mad?" Mobeii-Jun's voice is quiet, ringing out in the still, frigid air. "Your King is not mad. Disappointed, perhaps, that Shang Qinghua has hidden this, but this is a cause for celebration."

"Celebration?" Shang Qinghua's hands are gently taken in Mobei-Jun's own, Mobei-

Jun bringing them up to his lips in a tender kiss. The Sorcerer's breath hitches, eyes wide. "My King?"

"Sorcerer Shang Qinghua, you were meant to be at this King's side. Not only as a servant, but as the closest companion. The greater powers of this world have willed it into being, breathed it into the laws of this land. There is nothing else to say."

Actually, there are a lot of things to say! When—what, how, huh? Shang Qinghua's mouth falls open and shut a few times, brain quickly running to catch up with the event unfolding.

"My King, isn't this a bit too fast? I mean, I haven't done very much to deserve all of this affection—I might have stopped a few petty squabbles here and there, but all I really do is paperwork. Surely my King is rushing into this; even if we are soulmates, you shouldn't be bound by the same rules we humans are... My King should feel no such obligation."

"Shang Qinghua. These affections are not born out of obligation. I have been watching you—"

"So someone was watching me!"

"—And have seen all the care and consideration you have put into your work. Not only are you the hardest worker, you remain incredibly kind, even against scenarios that would have broken any other man. While you might not have seen these actions as noteworthy, it is because of that, that you prove yourself to be worthy at every moment."

"I... I see..." Shang Qinghua most certainly does not see, but he isn't about to correct Mobei-Jun when the man has done nothing but sing his praises. It's nice to be complimented like this—he's still a bit hung

up on the fact that Mobei-Jun had been watching him all that time, no doubt seeing his most embarrassing moments, but this is good! Very good. Infinitely preferable to being imprisoned or slaughtered. "Then, what does that make us...?"

It might be strange to continue their whole Master-Servant relationship, a King and his Sorcerer, after everything that's happened. But it feels wrong to call themselves lovers—the title doesn't just fit properly. While Shang Qinghua would embarrassingly admit that he loves Mobei-Jun, to call him his lover is a bit...off.

"We're soulmates."

"...You're right, My King. That we are."

Shang Qinghua lets himself bask in the moment, the glow of finally being loved. The feeling of Mobei-Jun's hands over his, the chill that's slowly beginning to fade away...Shang Qinghua allows himself to finally feel content, safe, and happy.

"We'll be needing to make an announcement." Mobei-Jun walks towards the exit, pulling Shang Qinghua along with him. "Make the proper arrangements. Soon the entire kingdom will know."

"Must the kingdom know so soon?" Shang Qinghua snaps out of his reverie, plunging into the cold ocean of reality. That sounds like so much work: all the logistics, bringing everyone together...but Shang Qinghua can't let Mobei-Jun do the work, lest he send out flyers all about how wonderful Shang Qinghua is. "We can wait just a bit."

"Nonsense. Everyone has already gathered, summoned for the—ah." Mobei-Jun has the gall to look sheepish as Shang Qinghua levels him a knowing stare. "It is an announcement about your soulmate all the same, Sorcerer Shang Qinghua. Everyone

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will be pleased."

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"Pleased" might be a bit of a stretch. Shang Qinghua sighs, shaking his head. He won't be able to look at any of the other servants for a week, but so falls the consequences of his own actions.

EACH FEATHER PULLED

Rating:

Teen & Up

Relationships:

Mobei-Jun/Shang Qinghua; Linguang-Jun/Shang Qinghua; Mobei-Jun & Linguang-Jun

Characters:

Shang Qinghua; Mobei-Jun; Linguang-Jun

Tags:

injury; blood; gaslighting; abusive relationship; marriage contract; forced marriage; mild self-injury

Summary:

During the First Hunt of his reign, Mobei-Jun, the Northern Dragon King, shoots a phoenix from the sky. To reverse the misfortune that Mobei-Jun will bring upon the kingdom, Linguang-Jun proposes to take its wings for luck when the phoenix reveals itself to be a shapeshifter—a Fenghuang. As Linguang-Jun's plan changes to something more sinister, Mobei-Jun must save what he once tried to kill.

Author:

MEOW

Beta(s):

Illustrated by:

FORGOTTENVICE, MEEKHAYL

Moyitaro

Mobei-Jun kneels serenely on the dais even though he feels like he'll shake apart. The First Elder of the Mobei Clan twists his hair into a half knot and slides the silver crown over it. She glides its pin across Mobei-Juns scalps. He winces when it scrapes against his horns.

He's too young to be king.

His father had the audacity to die before his twentieth birthday—and Mobei-Jun hates him for it.

For a year, he will be a child that serves as an ornamental and useless figurehead. For a year, his uncle will hold the full influence and power of the ancient Mobei Clan.

But there's no other choice.

The crowd genuflects. Heart in his ears, Mobei-Jun rises, powerless, as the Northern Dragon King.

"Nervous for your First Hunt, Nephew?" Linguang-Jun asks as they descend the dais.

Mobei-Jun lifts his chin, the aurora reflecting off the dozens of sapphires inlaid into his crown.

The First Hunt is an omen; its success or failure will foretell the fate of his reign. Mobei-Jun has been training for it since he took his first steps.

The First Hunt will be easy.

The First Hunt, in fact, is not easy.

It's nearly sunrise and Mobei-Jun remains empty-handed. They've journeyed through

the snowy steppe to the icy forests and there's been no sign of life...

... Except for this whooping ice quail.

It scratches at the ice beneath its fluffy feet, whooping angrily at the luminescent fish circling in the lake below.

Mobei-Jun crouches in the snow, just as his father taught him. His scaly tail twitches and he creeps forward, cat-like, soon within striking distance. His slitted pupils dilate, his claws unsheath—

A branch buried in the snow snaps underneath his feet and Mobei-Jun yelps, falling face first into the snow. The quail, whooping shrilly, flees into the mountains.

"It's almost sunrise," Linguang-Jun says haughtily. Mobei-Jun snarls and shakes off the snow from his hair.

"If only I could help you." Linguang-Jun clicks his tongue, his eyes fixed on the eastern horizon.

Mobei-Jun briefly wonders if Linguang-Jun counts as prey when his ears twitch at the hush of feathers.

"But this is *your* reign. Though it's unfair to expect someone so young and inexperienced to—"

"Quiet," Mobei-Jun hisses.

Linguang-Jun bristles. "While you are king, I recommend that you hold your tongue when your elder—"

Mobei-Jun holds his finger to his lips and nods towards a golden light shining through the glittering branches. The wind carries a mournful trill that crescendos into an aria.

"That's it," Linguang-Jun murmurs, his pupils narrowing to slits.

A pike of shining black ice forms at Mobei-Jun's fingertips and he launches it through the trees. A muffled *thud* and a shriek confirm that Mobei-Jun has hit his target.

Linguang-Jun claps him on the shoulder. As the two weave through the trees, Mobei-Jun holds his head high for the first time since his father's death.

But Mobei-Jun's confidence dies when they reach his kill. He falls to his knees.

"A phoenix," Mobei-Jun croaks. "I killed a phoenix."

The human-sized bird, now reduced to a bleeding mass of blue and gold feathers, struggles to breathe in the newly-red snow. Its tail is more ornate than a peacock's and its neck more elegant than a crane's. The wound caused by Mobei-Jun's pike barely missed its heart.

A near-perfect throw that Mobei-Jun will never be proud of. He waves his hand, the pike disappearing with a hush.

"I'm sure you remember what this means," Linguang-Jun says, emotionless.

"Of course I remember!" Every ancient bestiary, every scholar's diary, every legend and historical text say the same thing: killing a phoenix condemns its hunter to a fate worse than a thousand deaths.

"Luckily for you, it's still alive. But only just." Linguang-Jun kneels across from Mobei-Jun and plucks a delicate, golden flight feather from the very tip of the phoenix's right wing. He attaches it to his belt. "If you take its wings now, you can salvage most of its luck. It will save your reign."

"That's torture—"

"Good fortune takes sacrifice, Mobei."

Suddenly feeling ill, Mobei-Jun unsheathes his claws and unfurls a golden wing. The feathers are soft and warm under his touch. He takes a deep breath, his trembling hand hovering over its back. A sigh shivers out of the phoenix as it closes its eyes and accepts its fate.

(This is wrong; it shouldn't have to die.)

Mobei-Jun sinks his fangs into his wrist until he tastes blood, and holds his arm directly over the phoenix's gaping wound just as his mother had taught him. His blood drips down, coal black and glittering, and bubbles hotly on the phoenix's skin.

(The bleeding slows, but it's not enough—)

"Are you trying to heal it?! Mobei-"

(—Because the wound has barely closed. Of course—why would he be the healer his mother was? Why would it work?)

"—think for a moment—"

"This king does not require guidance-"

"Take its wings now or the North is doomed. If you don't understand that, you won't be a fraction of the king your father—"

"Shut up!"

With a growl and a well-placed jab, Linguang-Jun sends Mobei-Jun flying into a tree trunk. The back of the dragon's head cracks painfully against it, knocking his crown askew and making his vision swim.

Linguang-Jun wrenches one wing open and pins it down with his knee, the delicate bones snapping under his weight. The phoenix shrieks and swings its head wildly, snapping at whatever piece of Linguang-Jun it can find until the dragon shoves its head roughly into the snow. The phoenix goes limp with a defeated trill.

"That's it, little one," Linguang-Jun soothes, petting the bright blue feathers along its spine. "No need to struggle. It will all be over soon."

"Stop!"

The white dragon plunges his claws deep into the phoenix's back. Delicate tendons and sinews snap wetly, and the phoenix's pained warble morphs into a near-human, echoing scream—

With a deafening roar, Mobei-Jun tackles Linguang-Jun and digs his claws deep into his shoulders.

"Your king," Mobei-Jun grits through his teeth, "commanded you to stop."

"Idiot child!" Linguang-Jun hisses. He swipes his claws at Mobei-Jun, who easily dodges.

"This is *my* First Hunt!" he bellows. "And I will kill my prey if I wish to or—"

A soft sob precedes an even softer whisper: "Don't... Please..."

Crumpled where the phoenix once was, a man, naked and pale, lies prone in the snow. Bright blue and shining gold wings sprout from his back, the right wing broken and twisted with one feather missing from the very tip.

Mobei-Jun rushes towards him, but Linguang-Jun pulls him back.

"How dare you, Nephew?"

"What don't I dare?! You almost—"

"Not only a phoenix, but a *Fenghuang*?!" Linguang-Jun shoves him, sending Mobei-Jun sprawling to the ground. "I won't let you kill him, even if you *are* king."

Linguang-Jun clicks his tongue like a disappointed mother. He kneels beside the half-conscious Fenghuang and strokes the blue feathers along his spine.

"Get away from him!" Mobei-Jun screams. He raises his open hand, ready to claw his uncle's eyes out when Linguang-Jun speaks.

"I'm so sorry he hurt you... It will never happen again." Linguang-Jun helps the shivering Fenghuang sit up. His head flops on Linguang-Jun's shoulder. He pets the Fenghuang's soft brown hair that cascades down his back.

Mobei-Jun's eyes dart from Linguang-Jun's smirk to the Fenghuang's glazed-over stare.

"Your First Hunt is over." Linguang-Jun lifts the Fenghuang into his arms and retreats to the palace.

Mobei-Jun looks to the East, where the sun peers over the horizon.

The Fenghuang stretches his hands over the brazier and flexes life back into his fingers. The white dragon who had saved him from freezing to death places a pelt around his shoulders.

"Fenghuang," he greets, sitting next to him.

"Shang Qinghua," the Fenghuang corrects.

"Linguang-Jun." The white dragon closely inspects the splint bound to Shang Qinghua's wing. Shang Qinghua peers at him over his shoulder, his neck tilted at an awkward angle, catching sight of a feather hanging from Linguang-Jun's belt.

"You took a feather..."

Linguang-Jun sighs. "I apologize. My nephew made me pluck it when he tried to take your wings. He *is* king, but he's also a foolish child."

"Oh..."

"I can discard it if you wish."

"No, no, please keep it!" Shang Qinghua chirps, waving his hands. "You saved my life, take as many as you need!"

Linguang-Jun hums, smiling like a satisfied housecat.

"So...your nephew. Is he going to try to—? You know." Shang Qinghua makes a slicing motion across his throat.

"Mobei won't hurt you if you stay close to me," Linguang-Jun assures. "I won't let him hurt you again."

The entire palace knows that the First Hunt was a failure within an hour; the entire kingdom knows within a day.

Mobei-Jun is certain he would face execution if Linguang-Jun had not intervened and presented the injured—but alive—Fenghuang to the court.

("If Mobei-Jun hadn't shot him down," he'd explained to the crowd of dragons enviously staring at the feather on his belt, "then the Northern Dragon Kingdom wouldn't even know he exists.")

"Does Mobei-Jun wish to wear his crown today?"

Mobei-Jun, eyes swollen and bruised from exhaustion, sullenly glares at the reflection of his attendant in the silver mirror.

"Fine." She places his crown back on the dressing table. "But Mobei-Jun can't wallow forever."

He scowls. He'd almost doomed the entire kingdom. He can wallow all he wants.

"Afterall, Mobei-Jun brought back a Fenghuang!" She ties the final braid in his hair. "That alone should bring good fortune to the kingdom *and* to Mobei-Jun's reign."

"Hmph."

"Hopefully he will be a permanent guest. He's already made Linguang-Jun quite the gentleman! He's by his side day and night, doting on him..." She sighs wistfully. "It makes this one a bit jealous."

Mobei-Jun's eyebrow twitches and he fidgets.

Despite Linguang-Jun's constant company, the Fenghuang is still alive with both wings (mostly) attached. The right one is still a broken mess, but it's healing.

Maybe Linguang-Jun has good intentions...

Mobei-Jun quickly thanks his attendant, then grabs his cloak and marches to where he's been hiding since the Hunt: a mostly abandoned library in his mother's wing of the palace. Even after her death, he's kept it clean and well-stocked with the latest medical book, updated bestiaries...

...And mediocre romance novels. Her guilty pleasure.

He grabs the book he's left on her desk the night before and nestles into the same hidden nook he sought refuge in as a child. (He really hasn't grown up, has he?)

Uninterrupted silence passes for hours until he hears soft footfalls weaving through the shelves. He rolls his eyes. It's not even noon and someone is already looking for him.

"What do you want?" Mobei-Jun calls, petulantly turning the page.

"Oh! Gongzi! Sorry for interrupting, but I'm—ah..."

"You're what?" Mobei-Jun snaps, slamming his book shut and glaring at no one else but the Fenghuang—

—who immediately squeaks and stumbles backward. He collides with a bookshelf, which topples over and spills its contents onto the floor.

Mobei-Jun watches in horror as a particularly thick and loosely bound book hits the tile and explodes into a flurry of hundreds of pages.

"Damn it!" Mobei-Jun dives for the pages, ignoring the Fenghuang's panicked rambling.

"I-! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to-"

"I know!" Mobei-Jun shouts as he grabs for a sheet of near-transparent vellum. His shoulders droop and he brushes off a speck of dust. "I—I know..."

The Fenghuang hovers for a moment, an unsure hum in his throat. He then slowly crouches next to Mobei-Jun and delicately gathers some of the scattered pages, piling them on the broken binding.

"You don't have to help." Mobei-Jun reaches for another sheet of vellum, accidentally brushing his fingers against the Fenghuang's. The Fenghuang tenses for a moment, then smiles.

"It's the least I can do after knocking everything over." He draws his dark blue cloak around him, the white fur trim tickling his jaw. Silver hair ornaments are woven throughout his dark brown hair, and sapphire drops hang elegantly from his ears.

Mobei-Jun breaks his stare and continues cleaning up.

"These are beautiful." The Fenghuang admires a drawing of a frost peach blossom, a flower that only grows in the North. "What book is this?"

"Not a book." His throat bobs. "My mother's research. She was an herbalist."

The Fenghuang, looking quite ashamed, silently collects the last of the pages and closes the book cover.

"Here. This lowly one apologizes for damaging something so precious," he murmurs, head bowed. Mobei-Jun takes it and clutches it to his chest.

A few moments later, the Fenghuang softly asks: "So, ah...if you don't mind, what book were you reading?"

"The Emperor's Tailor."

The Fenghuang blinks, then wriggles excitedly. "Really?!" What's your favorite part?"

"Waterfall."

"Me too! What did you like about it?" he asks, shuffling closer. "Not that it matters! This one is merely curious—"

"Their selflessness," Mobei-Jun interrupts. "A willing, mutual sacrifice."

The Fenghuang's eyebrows lift and his face brightens. "Yes! That's exactly what I—" He coughs. "What the author wanted to convey.

If you like it, I—the same author wrote a sequel and—"

"Qinghua!"

"Oh! Linguang-Jun!" The Fenghuang, grinning widely, scampers to him. "Sorry. I was lost."

"I see you've met Mobei-Jun," Linguang-Jun says stiffly.

The Fenghuang pales and snaps his head around. "He—You're—"

Mobei-Jun glares at his uncle, his tail twitching, then bows to the Fenghuang.

"I apologize for not introducing myself earlier."

The Fenghuang whimpers and presses himself to Linguang-Jun's side. Linguang-Jun pets the back of his neck, squeezing gently.

"It's alright," Linguang-Jun whispers. "Introduce yourself. I promise I won't let him hurt you."

The Fenghuang takes a few stuttered steps forward, then genuflects stiffly.

"This one is called Shang Qinghua. Thank" he gulps, shivering—"thanking Mobei-Jun for allowing this lowly Fenghuang to stay."

"Thank you for your help with my mother's notes. Come back to the library anytime you wish."

Shang Qinghua's brow twitches and he looks Mobei-Jun up and down. "Ah? But I wrecked—"

"Come, Qinghua. Mobei-Jun is busy reading trash books. We shouldn't bother him."

Shang Qinghua winces. Linguang-Jun places a hand at the small of his back and leads Shang Qinghua away.

Shang Qinghua casts a cautious glance over his shoulder to Mobei-Jun carefully setting each book on an upright shelf.

"What were you thinking? He tried to *kill* you," Linguang-Jun hisses. "Who knows if he'll try again?"

"But he didn't-"

"He might," Linguang-Jun snaps.

"Right." Shang Qinghua faces forward and straightens his spine. "Of course..."

A month later, Linguang-Jun and Shang Qinghua are wandering the palace grounds when something catches Shang Qinghua's eye.

"Linguang-Jun, look!" He trots to a frost peach tree and plucks a blossom from one of the branches. He presents it to Linguang-Jun. "A frost peach blossom."

"A common flower," Linguang-Jun hums, locking eyes with Shang Qinghua, "but beautiful all the same." He accepts the flower, plucking a small petal from the bloom.

"I didn't think that something like this could grow here..."

"You would be surprised at what can thrive in the Northern Desert." He tucks the flower behind Shang Qinghua's ear and strokes his cheek. He smiles softly when Shang Qinghua averts his eyes, blushing a soft pink.

He continues: "You know that they all wish to take your wings, don't you? It's not just Mobei-Jun. The entire palace sees you as prey."

Shang Qinghua's breath hitches when Linguang-Jun leans close to his ear.

"Take an Oath with me, Qinghua. Let me protect you."

On an unusually sunny morning, Mobei-Jun finds Linguang-Jun and Shang Qinghua drinking tea underneath a blossoming frost peach tree. Shang Qinghua's hair is decorated with even more silver and gems, his embroidered cloak now made from the same elegant and flowing cloth worn by the denizens of the kingdom. His broken wing is finally free from its splint, but hangs loosely at his side.

Mobei-Jun takes a centering breath and approaches, gripping the book under his cloak tightly. Linguang-Jun notices him first and stiffly gestures at the seat across from him. Mobei-Jun sits.

"Uncle."

"Nephew." Linguang-Jun takes a sip of tea. "Ready for the council meeting?"

Mobei-Jun hums dismissively and stares at Shang Qinghua, who is busily blowing air into his hands.

He chooses this exact time to shove the book under Shang Qinghua's nose.

The Fenghuang squeaks and flinches back,

then blinks up at Mobei-Jun with gold, bewildered eyes.

"You liked 'The Emperor's Tailor," Mobei-Jun explains. "Read this one."

"I—Thank you!" Shang Qinghua takes the book carefully as if it would disintegrate in his hands. "I promise to return it when I'm done!"

"Don't." Mobei-Jun's brows lift. "It's a gift."

Linguang-Jun draws his mouth into a thin line.

"I can't take this! What if you want to read it again?!"

"I'll borrow it."

Shang Qinghua, starry-eyed, flips open the cover and starts to read.

"Time to go," Linguang-Jun announces. He drains his tea cup. "Wait here, Qinghua."

"En!"

Mobei-Jun follows his uncle, but stops when Shang Qinghua suddenly calls his

name and trots up to him. The Fenghuang reaches into his cloak, tongue between his teeth. His nose scrunches for a moment, then Mobei-Jun hears the hush of a feather brushing against fabric.

"Here." He holds out a glowing feather with both hands. Mobei-Jun takes it and it warms his hands like a sunbeam.

"It's not much, but it should bring Mobei-Jun some luck during his meeting," Shang Qinghua explains, flashing a quick smile. It's nervous and only a fraction of the ones for Linguang-Jun, but it's just as blinding.

"Thank you, Shang-xiong."

He fidgets and averts his eyes. "It's Qinghua."

"... Thank you, Qinghua." Mobei-Jun tucks the feather into a hidden pocket along his collar. "I will treasure it."

"Ah?!" Shang Qinghua blushes and waves his hands around. "It's only a feather! A mere token, really! I have hundreds and they always grow back and-"

"Nephew."

Mobei-Jun scowls and trudges off to the council room,

Shang Qinghua watches Mobei-Jun disappear down a narrow corridor. Shivering, he sits at the table and continues to read.

"This Council can adjourn."

"Apologies, but this Linguang-Jun has

one more item to present to the Council." Linguang-Jun stands, folding one arm behind his back and clearing his throat. "Shang Qinghua and I wish to take an Oath."

The Council's hushed murmurs buzz against the walls. Mobei-Jun, previously bored out of his skull, sits up.

"Before Mobei-Jun?" Fifth Elder asks, eyes narrowed. "The king marries first when a new reign begins. It's *tradition*."

"Does Fifth Elder not remember the First Hunt? Mobei-Jun would have returned empty-handed had he not almost killed a Fenghuang moments before sunrise."

The Council murmurs in agreement. Mobei-Jun growls low, his claws digging into the arms of his chair.

Linguang-Jun continues: "This lord wishes to combat a young king's misfortune." He turns to Mobei-Jun. "Unless he objects."

Mobei-Jun grips his chair tighter, fangs bared. Even if he objected, Linguang-Jun would overrule him.

He has no choice.

"This king approves. Dismissed."

The First Oath of Mobei-Jun's reign takes place during the next full moon. Mobei-Jun stands on the dais, not as a participant as the Northern King should be, but as a witness.

A dragon and Fenghuang's marriage is rare, a boon to whichever kingdom is fortunate enough to witness it.

Still, Mobei-Jun feels uneasy.

Linguang-Jun and Shang Qinghua, dressed opulently, stand before him. With their hands intertwined, they form their Oath:

"This lord will treasure you," Linguang-Jun promises, "until the Deserted North thaws."

"This one will be devoted to you," Shang Qinghua responds, his smile warm, "until each golden feather is pulled."

A dim light passes through their fingertips. The Oath is sealed.

They descend the dais to a genuflecting crowd. Shang Qinghua's wings flex stiffly. Mobei-Jun wonders if they had been brighter the week before.

Two golden feathers hang from Linguang-Jun's belt.

"Mobei! Come celebrate my engagement with me!"

.....

Mobei-Jun sits at the low table, his tail flicking behind him. Linguang-Jun smiles to himself and pours Mobei-Jun a small bowl of wine.

"Uncle, you know there's no point in playing with your prey like this."

Linguang-Jun lifts an eyebrow. "Prey?"

"I know you plan to take his wings. What else should I call him?"

Linguang-Jun hums and takes the two feathers from his belt. He places them on the table between them, then taps the one on the left—its gleam much duller than the other's.

"I took this feather from Qinghua during the Hunt," Linguang-Jun says; he then points to the shining feather on the right. "And this one before we took our Oath today."

"And?"

"Even you should know Fenghuang feathers only last for so long. Even whole wings eventually fade, and their luck with it." He thoughtfully takes a sip of his wine. "It's wiser to keep him alive as my consort and pull each feather one by one. Don't you agree?"

Mobei-Jun tips his wine into his mouth, then pours himself another bowl.

"Mobei-Jun! Wait-"

The black dragon stills, frowning when he sees the dark circles under Shang Qinghua's eyes.

"Qinghua," Mobei-Jun greets, walking towards Shang Qinghua to meet him halfway.

"This one has a favor to ask." He wrings his hands. "I have to plan our engagement party and I don't know anything about Northern customs—"

"That's obvious—"

"Hey!" Shang Qinghua puffs his cheeks out.

"—because Qinghua's *future husband* should be planning it instead," Mobei-Jun finishes.

"Oh! No, A-Lin asked if I could take over.

He's on a month-long ambassadorial trip to the Southern Kingdoms. He won't be back in time to plan an entire event." Shang Qinghua shivers, the beads in his hair chiming.

"He left without telling you what to do?

Shang Qinghua laughs nervously. Mobei-Jun pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Come with me."

The more Mobei-Jun explains every single detail needed to throw the most minimal of engagement parties, the paler Shang Qinghua becomes. Mobei-Jun is certain that Shang Qinghua is going to faint, until the Fenghuang steels his expression and thanks him for the help. Mobei-Jun watches from a distance as Shang Qinghua makes the most fearsome dragons do menial labor.

In fact, everything is going perfectly until Shang Qinghua bursts into the library screaming that he forgot to send invitations.

"I'm so sorry," Shang Qinghua sniffles for the thousandth time. He finishes his signature on one invitation with a flourish, then moves on to the next one.

"It's fine," Mobei-Jun yawns.

(A lie. It's past midnight, and all he can think of is sleep.)

"How many are left?"

"Ten. Twelve. I don't know." Shang Qinghua rubs his aching hand.

"Who is it?"

Shang Qinghua picks up the guest list and squints. "His fourth cousins?"

"Uninvited." Mobei-Jun throws his brush down.

"But-"

"Uninvited."

Shang Qinghua sighs in relief, shivering. He draws his wings closer around his body.

"Cold?"

"A little—wait! No, don't light a fire! You're an *ice dragon*, it—"

"Don't worry about me. It's uncomfortable, but it doesn't hurt."

"Oh."

Mobei-Jun crouches in front of the brazier, activating its talisman with a gentle stroke of his fingers. The fire roars to life and he removes his cloak, wrapping it tightly around Shang Qinghua's trembling shoulders. Mobei-Jun rubs Shang Qinghua's arms; he hopes that it brings him some warmth despite his freezing touch.

"Why are you only wearing silk? Don't you have a cloak?" Mobei-Jun clicks his tongue.

"I—" Shang Qinghua bites his lip and stares at his lap. "No."

"I'll ask the tailor to make a new one for you."

Shang Qinghua's brow furrows. "A-Lin is ordering a new one for me when he returns."

Mobei-Jun growls and snatches his cloak from Shang Qinghua's shoulders. He's on the verge of crying when Mobei-Jun pulls out a small pendant from a hidden pocket. "Warming talisman." Mobei-Jun places the pendant around Shang Qinghua's neck. "It would have been your engagement gift, but you've been shivering for weeks."

Within moments, Shang Qinghua's trembling disappears, color coming back to his face.

"Qinghua?"

Shang Qinghua looks up at him from under his eyelashes.

"Out of everyone, why did you ask me for help? I hurt you."

His face scrunches as he tries to smile. "You don't ask for feathers like everyone else. Even A-Lin—"

Shang Qinghua's eyes widen after his confession. He claps his hand over his mouth and whimpers quietly.

Alarmed, Mobei-Jun cups his face and swipes a tear track from Shang Qinghua's cheek.

"Mobei...?"

"What is it?" he asks gently.

Shang Qinghua leans forward, closing the distance between them. He touches one of Mobei-Jun's hands and squeezes.

"Nothing, just—" His breath hitches. "It's the first time I've felt warm here."

The Northern Palace is a vision of sparkling ice. The Summer Aurora's light refracts beautifully through each of the facets, making the entire hall look as if it's carved

from thousands upon thousands of precious stones.

But it's nothing compared to Shang Qinghua.

Draped in blue and silver and golden light, he stirs something deep and unsure in Mobei-Jun's chest. He wishes he could be anywhere but here, could do anything but watch Shang Qinghua hang off of Linguang-Jun's arm as if he belongs there.

"Does Emperor Luo wish for a Fenghuang feather?" Linguang-Jun rubs the back of Shang Qinghua's neck with his thumb.

Emperor Luo narrows his eyes "No, thank you."

"Nonsense, I insist. You traveled so far to celebrate our engagement, afterall."

"He doesn't want it." Mobei-Jun growls. "And those feathers aren't yours to give."

Linguang-Jun gets startled at Mobei-Jun's sudden appearance, then smirks.

"Speaking for others? One does wonder what kind of king you are becoming, Mobei."

"This one does not mind," Shang Qinghua chirps. "I've given a feather to everyone else who traveled."

"This lord apologizes for his nephew," Linguang-Jun says to Emperor Luo. "For his indiscretion, Emperor Luo should take two."

Emperor Luo looks thoroughly unimpressed. But Shang Qinghua already holds two feathers, head bowed, so Emperor Luo has no choice but to take them.

"Qinghua," Linguang-Jun continues, "I believe we haven't given Nephew a feather Each Feather Pulled Each Feather Pulled

tonight."

Mobei-Jun pales. "No, I—"

"I can give him one of mine," Emperor Luo says. "I don't need them."

Deaf to this suggestion, Shang Qinghua pulls out a feather with a snap.

"My king," he murmurs, presenting it to Mobei-Jun. He takes the feather and bows deeply.

"I wish I had something to give in return."

"You gave me this." He gestures at the onyx amulet hanging from his neck. "You've more than repaid me."

Linguang-Jun clears his throat. Shang Qinghua quickly bows and they both disappear into the crowd.

"I don't like this," Emperor Luo mutters, eyes narrowed.

Mobei-Jun stays silent. He doesn't have a choice.

Later that evening, Mobei-Jun catches the faint scent of iron lingering in the air. Small blood spatters cross the floor, forming a path to Shang Qinghua.

The tips of his feathers are stained red.

The party couldn't have ended quickly enough.

Mobei-Jun heads back to his rooms with a stolen bottle of wine as his only company. Tossing aside the lid, he pours some down his throat. He can't quite bring himself to taste it.

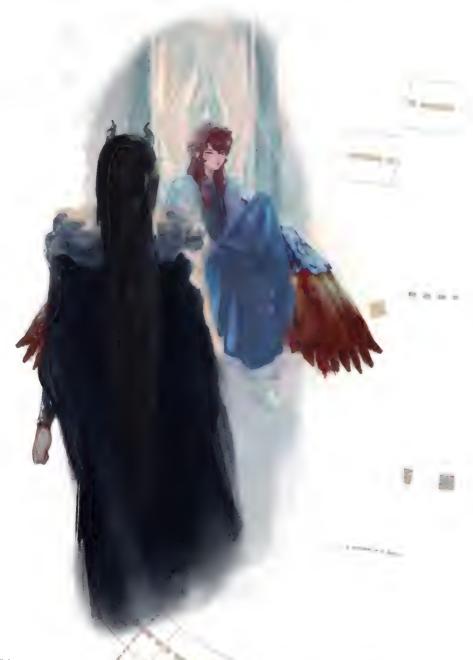
"Mobei."

"Fuck!" The bottle topples from his hands, but he manages to catch it before it hits the ground. There's a faint giggle to his right.

"Nice catch."

There, perched on a windowsill, is Shang Qinghua. He's still in his robes from the engagement party, but his hair is unbound, falling down his shoulders in soft waves.

"How did I do?"



"Perfectly. I received several compliments on your behalf." The corners of Mobei-Jun's mouth tick upward and he takes a drink.

"I couldn't have done it without you."

"You're the one who planned everything."
His gaze wanders to Shang Qinghua's wing hanging loosely at his side. The tips of his feathers are still stained red.

"I guess I plucked too many, ah?" His wing flexes stiffly; this time, he cannot hide his wince.

Mobei-Jun scowls.

"Ah, don't look at me like that, my king! It's nothing that a little salve can't fix!"

"May I look?"

Shang Qinghua extends his wing, exposing a large gap between his flight feathers. Horrified, Mobei-Jun bites open his wrist and carefully smears his blood against the sores. Shang Qinghua cries out at the touch, but soon relaxes and puffs out a sigh.

"Better?"

"Better." He reaches for the wine. "Give."

They pass the wine back and forth in silence as the aurora fades. When they finish, Shang Qinghua hops down and stretches with a yawn.

"I'm gonna go to bed."

"Qinghua?"

Shang Qinghua tilts his head to the side.

"Why did you let him pluck your feathers?"

"I plucked them. It was my choice."

"It wasn't."

Shang Qinghua opens his mouth to protest, his eyes flashing.

"He will take everything from you, Qinghua," Mobei-Jun interrupts. "Your feathers, your flesh... He'll pluck you until there's nothing left but bones."

Shang Qinghua folds his wings stiffly behind his back, straightening his spine. He wears the same nauseatingly cheery smile as he did at the party.

"It doesn't matter, my king. It's nothing compared to what Linguang-Jun has given me."

"And what exactly is that? Robes that don't warm you? Baubles that you remove the instant you're out of his sight?"

"He saved my life. He gave me a future here."

"You believe that?"

"You're the one who tried to kill me." Shang Qinghua's voice is poisonous, sharp. "Or did you already forget?"

Mobei-Jun throws the wine jar against the wall, where it shatters into a thousand pieces. Shang Qinghua yelps, taking a stuttered step backward.

"How could I forget?! I'm reminded every time I see you!" Mobei-Jun snarls, his fangs bared. Mobei-Jun's throat bobs and he turns to the window. "If I'm this horrible, don't seek me out again."

"Mobei-"

"Scram!"

Shang Qinghua retreats, the gauzy silks of his robe floating behind him like a ghost.

54

Weeks after the engagement party, Shang Qinghua still hasn't left his chambers. He morosely glances at his now hideous wings, the golden flight feathers halfway gone.

He's rubbing the surface of the onyx pendant with his thumb absentmindedly when Linguang-Jun speaks.

"I'm leaving for the East tonight."

"You just returned from the South."

"I'm sorry. This should be the last ambassadorial meeting before our wedding."

Shang Qinghua relaxes, feeling less abandoned until Linguang-Jun speaks again.

"I need a few feathers as gifts."

His throat bobs. "How many?"

"Eleven."

He's too tired to argue that eleven is more than a few. After several painful *snaps* that make his eyes water, he gives Linguang-Jun the feathers.

"No need to cry," Linguang-Jun soothes. "Good fortune takes sacrifice."

He swipes a tear from Shang Qinghua's eye with his thumb. Shang Qinghua sniffles and nods stiffly.

"Rest while I'm gone. You look sick." He claps a white jade pendant around Shang Qinghua's neck. "And wear this."

They exchange a hurried goodbye. As Shang Qinghua shuffles back to bed, he catches a glimpse of himself in the bronze mirror. A

fully-healed reflection glimmers back.

He throws on his robes, thinner than vellum.

He needs to find Mobei-Jun.

Mobei-Jun is returning from another pointless council meeting when he catches sight of Shang Qinghua. The tips of his ears burn. Shang Qinghua's robes are so sheer he can see the outline of his body.

"Qinghua," Mobei-Jun calls, gently grabbing Shang Qinghua by the shoulders before he bumps into him. Shang Qinghua doesn't lift his head.

"Found you." He sways on his feet.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Shang Qinghua laughs coldly. Mobei-Jun squints at the soft shimmer surrounding him.

"You're wearing a glamour."

He stumbles, falling against Mobei-Jun. He grips Mobei-Jun's robes tightly and his breath shivers in his chest. Gripping to him tightly, Mobei-Jun ushers Shang Qinghua to his chambers. He sits next to Shang Qinghua on a fur pelt in front of a low table.

"Show me."

Wordlessly, Shang Qinghua removes the white jade pendant with trembling hands. The illusion dissolves, revealing that his glow is nearly nothing. He shrugs the layers of translucent silk from his shoulders, fully exposing the thatch of blue feathers along

his spine, from his nape to the dimples of his hips.

But his wings...

The blue feathers along the top remain untouched, but the golden flight feathers are a mere fraction of what they had been. Mobei-Jun carefully unfolds a threadbare wing and murmurs an apology when Shang Qinghua hisses in pain. Shang Qinghua drops salve on the table and Mobei-Jun smears it on his bleeding sores.

"Go on, my king. Tell me."

"What am I supposed to tell you?"

"That I'm foolish." His hands tremble in his lap.

"You're not."

"But you told me this would happen, that he would take everything and—" Shang Qinghua cuts himself off with a sniff.

Then in a pained whisper: "What do you want from me?"

Mobei-Jun stops spreading the salve and meets Shang Qinghua's angry, watery eyes.

"Why are you doing this, Mobei?!" Shang Qinghua slams his fists on the table, the glamour clattering to the floor. "No one else will look at me unless I give them a feather! But you—! You never ask! I don't understand why—"

Shang Qinghua falls silent when Mobei-Jun cups his face with both hands.

"I don't need feathers," Mobei-Jun whispers, pressing their foreheads together. "I met you. Having better fortune is impossible."

Shang Qinghua takes deep, shuddering breaths, then throws his arms around

Mobei-Jun. He crashes their mouths together in a desperate kiss that knocks Mobei-Jun backward and leaves him breathless.

"I'm sorry," Shang Qinghua whispers hoarsely. He tries to push himself up from the plush fur rug, but Mobei-Jun wraps his arms around his waist and pulls him closer.

"I'm not." Mobei-Jun tilts Shang Qinghua's jaw and presses a chaste kiss to the corner of his mouth. He gently scratches through the feathers on Shang Qinghua's back. The Fenghuang nearly purrs and settles against Mobei-Jun's chest.

Lulled by Shang Qinghua's even breaths, Mobei-Jun falls asleep.

Mobei-Jun stirs at the sound of footsteps. It must be a dream; Shang Qinghua is still curled against him. No one else would be here.

Squinting in the dark, he only sees the aurora shining through the window.

He falls back asleep.

Shang Qinghua rifles through books and robes littering his floor.

"I swear I put it back on..." He touches his neck where the white jade hung a day ago.

"Put what back on?"

Shang Qinghua startles. "A-Lin! What are you doing back?"

"Something more important happened," he says, frowning. "You're not wearing my gift."

"I lost it. I've looked everywhere for it and—"

"Did you check Mobei's rooms?" Linguang-Jun, his expression hard, holding his fist out in front of him. The pendant dangles between his fingers. "Sleeping next to my nephew like a common whore. It's almost like you don't understand what an Oath is, Fenghuang."

Shang Qinghua pales. "A-Lin, I can explain—"

Linguang-Jun grabs Shang Qinghua by the hair, yanking him to his feet. He smiles wickedly, fangs bared.

"You swore to be mine until I pulled every feather." His grip tightens. "And I have. Except for one."

Shang Qinghua yelps and kicks at Linguang-Jun's shin. He misses, but it's enough to startle him into letting go. Shang Qinghua runs, reaching for the door—

His fingertips brush against it when Linguang-Jun grabs him by the wings and pulls. With two hollow *pops*, his wings are broken beyond repair.

Linguang-Jun shoves him to the ground, his knee on Shang Qinghua's spine. He wrenches a shattered wing open, laughing when Shang Qinghua screams.

"What a shame," Linguang-Jun scoffs, slowly pulling at a delicate pin feather. "Your new feathers were coming in so nicely."

"Please—!" Shang Qinghua gasps, desperately trying to crawl away. Linguang-Jun fists his hand in Shang Qinghua's hair and slams his head to the floor. Shang Qinghua whimpers and goes limp.

"That's it, little one," Linguang-Jun laughs, sinking his claws into his back. "No need to struggle. It will all be over soon."

... It wasn't over soon.

The sunset pours through the window, washing over Shang Qinghua's fingertips. Golden feathers—new and old—surround him like dead fireflies, their glow all but gone.

"I'll return with our wedding robes tonight."

Linguang-Jun's boots click quietly as he walks away. The door slams shut.

Shang Qinghua finally allows himself to cry.

One golden feather remains at the very tip of his right wing.

The entire palace celebrates when Linguang-Jun announces that the wedding will take place at sunset.

"Qinghua and I can no longer wait to be married," he says proudly. "Please ensure that he's ready in time."

Mobei-Jun's heartbeat rings in his ears when Linguang-Jun smiles at him.

"Mobei, don't look disappointed. You should be happy. Your uncle is marrying a Fenghuang today."

"Where's Qinghua?" Mobei-Jun asks, unable to hide the tremor in his voice.

Linguang-Jun smirks, then turns to the servants.

"It will be slapdash, but let's try to make the hall as elegant as possible, hm?"

Mobei-Jun backs out of the hall and runs.

After what felt like hours, Mobei-Jun breathlessly rushes to a side room where Shang Qinghua sits at a dressing table. An attendant uselessly applies makeup to cover the bruises on his cheek; another wraps small scraps of cloth around his wings to stabilize the shattered bones.

"Good evening, Mobei-Jun," Shang Qinghua says, his fake smile faltering. He lifts his chin. "How do I look?"

He should be beautiful; Shang Qinghua looks as if he's half-dead.

Mobei-Jun's throat bobs. "Could you leave Qinghua and I for a moment?"

The attendants exit quietly. As soon as they're out of sight, Mobei-Jun kneels in front of Shang Qinghua.

"Mobei, he's leaving one on purpose—" Shang Qinghua wheezes. "He—"

The single gold feather that remains on Shang Qinghua's crumpled wings glows softly against his red wedding robes. Mobei-Jun's brow lifts and he grabs Shang Qinghua's hand.

"We have to go-"

"I can't!" Shang Qinghua wails. "The Oath

isn't broken, I can't!"

"Qinghua, listen to me-!"

A guard enters the side room. He walks past Mobei-Jun to Shang Qinghua. He looks down his nose at the Fenghuang, whose panicked breaths whistle in his throat.

"It's time, Shang-furen."

Mobei-Jun growls, claws drawn to swipe at guard when a spear is held to his throat.

"Anyone who interferes will be executed, Mobei-Jun. Be careful."

Shang Qinghua shrieks when the guard grabs him by the bicep.

A moment later, the guard falls in a heap, a pike of black ice piercing his heart. A perfect throw.

Mobei-Jun grabs Shang Qinghua's hand.

"Linguang-Jun broke the Oath. He pulled that feather the day I shot you from the sky."

An alarm sounds when Mobei-Jun and Shang Qinghua are still in sight of the palace gate. Linguang-Jun's red silhouette closes the distance, his hunting party close behind. Arrows whistle past them. Mobei-Jun curses and pulls Shang Qinghua onto his back. He picks up his pace, running at breakneck speed towards the woods.

The forest's icy branches crackle around them, drowning out the shouts in the distance. Shang Qinghua lets go of Mobei-Jun, landing softly on his feet. Mobei-Jun doubles over and tries to catch his breath. The shouting in the distance grows louder. Shang Qinghua hardens his expression and grabs Mobei-Jun's hand, leading them deeper into the woods. They run through the trees, freedom just within grasp.

Suddenly, Shang Qinghua comes to a halt at the sharp drop of a cliffside.

Mobei-Jun hears the wet thud of a spear piercing through flesh, followed by pain blooming through his shoulder. He stumbles backward, pulling Shang Qinghua down with him. Desperately, he cradles the Fenghuang in his arms and braces for impact.

They land in a snowbank, Shang Qinghua secure and uninjured. The comforting silence washes over them as they catch their breath.

A red silhouette appears on the cliff.

With the last of his energy, Mobei-Jun stands and pulls the spear from his shoulder. He stumbles, his left leg giving way.

It's over.

He shoves the spear into Shang Qinghua's hands. "Run."

"I'm not leaving you!" He throws the spear to the ground. "There's another way!"

"He won, Qinghua," Mobei-Jun croaks around the lump in his throat. "Go. Please."

Shang Qinghua unfolds his shattered wing—the shattered bones grinding painfully against each other—and grabs the last feather. Upon his touch, it shines so brightly that it rivals the Sun. With a *snap*, it comes free.

"Take an Oath with me." Shang Qinghua takes Mobei-Jun's hands in his, the feather between their clasped fingers.

"Go! I don't need an Oath, I need you alive-!"

"Mobei..." Shang Qinghua presses their foreheads together, eyes closed. "Please."

Shaking in pain, Mobei-Jun closes his eyes.

"I promise I will always love you to the ends of the Earth. All I ask is that you come find me."

"I promise to find you." Mobei-Jun brushes his thumb across Shang Qinghua's cheekbone where new feathers sprout. "My love is more plentiful than the northern snowfall, and I *will* find you."

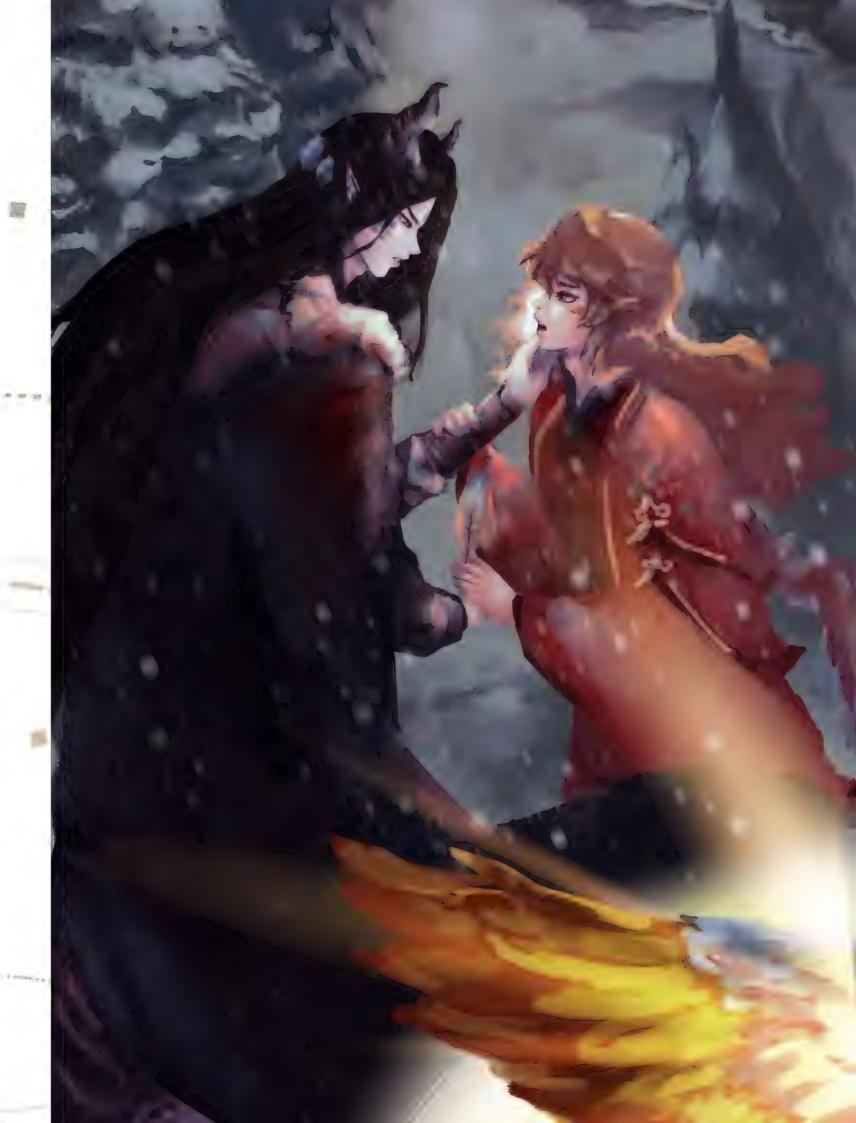
Light envelops them, their Oath sealed and Fates forever intertwined.

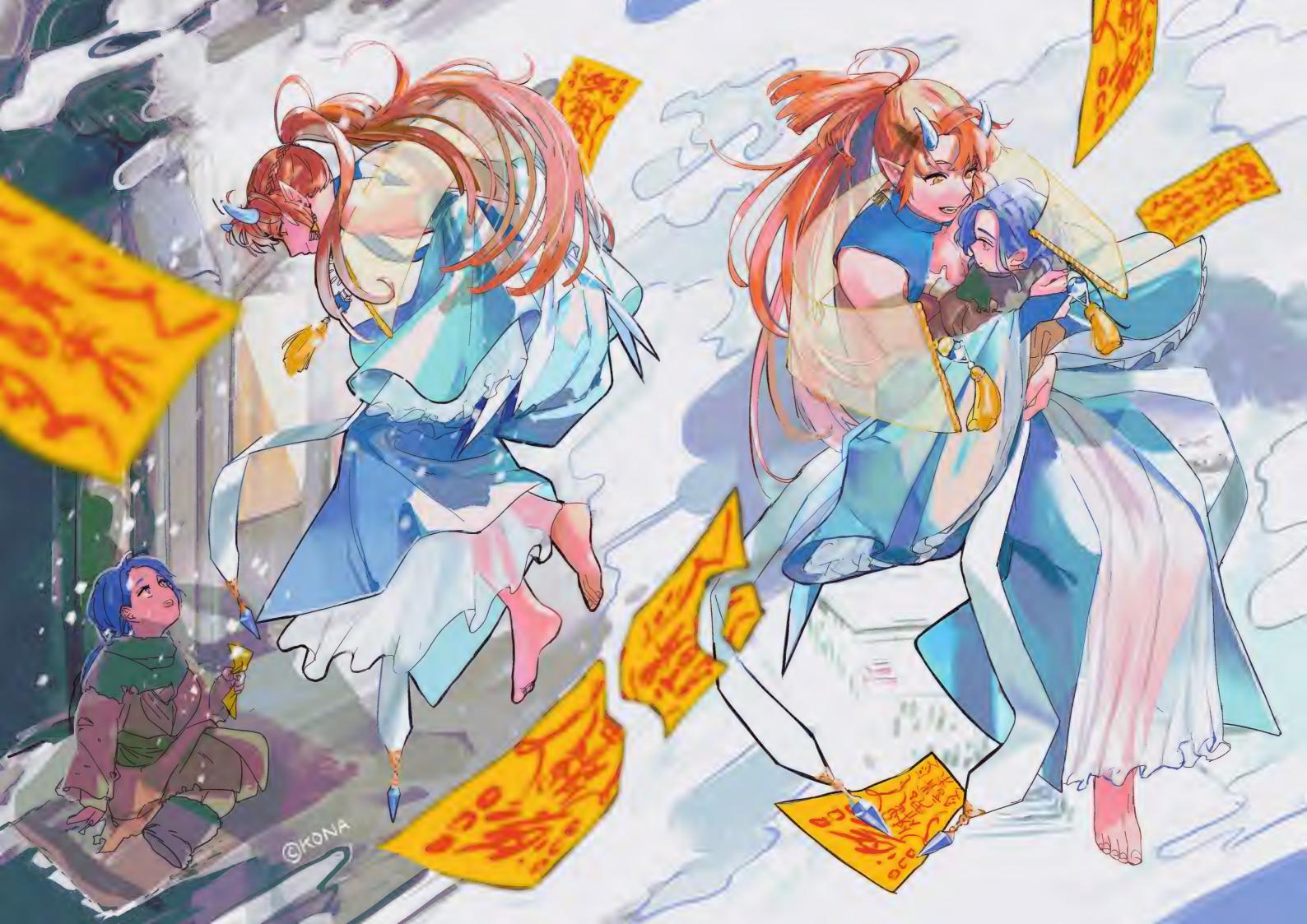
At the bottom of the cliff, Linguang-Jun finds no one.

Above the snowy steppe, a phoenix rises in a sunburst brighter than the North will ever see again. It disappears over the horizon with a triumphant, mournful cry.

A discarded silver crown decorated with glittering sapphires lies next to footprints leading South; whoever left them is nowhere to be seen.

Red wedding robes litter the snow.





LIFE ETERNAL

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/ Shang Qinghua

Characters

Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun, Luo Binghe, Shen Qingqiu, Liu Qingge, Liu Mingyan, Linguang-Jun

Tags

Major Character Death, Orpheus and Eurydice AU, falling in love, angst, no happy ending, background Bingqiu

Summary

Shang Qinghua, a lonely poet, meets and woos Mobei-Jun, an aloof winter spirit. When tragedy strikes down their brief romance, Shang Qinghua travels to the Realm of the Underworld, determined to win back the soul of his beloved.

Author:

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Beta(s):

Illustrated by:

YourPersonalPrince

Meekhayl

Shang Qinghua breathed in the sharp winter air. He wasn't sure how long he had lingered under this tree, brush in hand and empty parchment resting in his lap. The scene was lacking inspiration, the blanket of white snow around him offering nothing.

Setting aside his brush and paper, Shang Qinghua stood and stretched, trudging off through the woods. A change of scenery might be just what he needed.

With only the sound of his boots crunching through the snow and the soft rush of wind through the trees, the forest was eerily quiet. Low branches parted for him as Shang Qinghua turned towards more dense woods and he murmured his thanks to the pines.

The plants and trees had enjoyed his company for as long as he could remember. Without them being there to listen to his ramblings and poetry, his life would have been unbearably solitary. No one ever stayed around him long. Even if they didn't speak in the traditional sense, they still offered their input whenever he asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shang Qinghua caught a glimmer as the sun came out from behind the clouds. The trees in this part of the forest were decorated, spiraling patterns of frost covering the trunks and branches in the fashion of winter. Shang Qinghua looked around, searching for the one responsible for such handiwork. The branches lifted and Shang Qinghua followed them. As he began to run, the branches blurred and the winter air pricked at his eyes.

Stumbling into a clearing, Shang Qinghua stopped himself short. In front of him was a Winter spirit dressed head to toe in snow white robes with inky black hair flowing down his back. He ceased in his work, turning to face Shang Qinghua.

Shang Qinghua's breath caught in his throat. He'd met spirits before, glancing at the spirits of Summer, splashing in the ponds, and dallied with Spring spirits—sitting in fields of flowers, reciting poetry for them to laugh at as they weaved crowns of lilies together. But none of them compared to the ethereal Winter spirit in front of him.

His cold, shut off expression did nothing to lessen his beauty. Despite the fact that he was a Winter spirit, the robes were still made to withstand the cold. A white fur collar peeked out from white fabric embroidered with blue and silver swirls down wide sleeves and collar. His hair was pulled back from his face and decorated with jewels resembling drops of ice. Blue ribbons were woven into small braids, matching the piercing blue of his eyes. Between his brows sat a pale blue huadian, making his position as a Winter spirit clear.

Even with a job as delicate and intricate as crafting frost patterns, the spirit was tall and imposing, his jaw and browline strong as he glared down from his impressive height at Shang Qinghua.

Shang Qinghua suddenly felt very self conscious and underdressed, a mere mortal facing one of the most beautiful and striking spirits he had ever had the luck of laying eyes on.

The spirit's mouth turned down into a frown as Shang Qinghua floundered for words—for anything to say.

"The sun is blinding in a field of white, Clouds pass until the scene is revealed; Artistry crafted by hand, Never appreciated more than in the moment."

The spirit blinked, taken aback by Shang Qinghua's words. He could have sworn he saw those pointed ears turn blue—but the spirit looked away so quickly, he couldn't be sure. With a flick of the spirit's wrist, Shang Qinghua found himself suddenly covered in snow from the trees above. Buried, he heard the spirit's muffled footsteps retreating away. By the time he'd cleared the snow off of himself and shaken it from his hair, his boots and his robes, the spirit was long gone.

Shang Qinghua flopped back, face red. He couldn't help but let out a laugh, covering his face with his hands. He'd never seen such a reaction to his poetry! He'd been playfully splashed by the nymphs or ignored by fauns—but to be so blatantly shunned...

Shang Qinghua might be in love.

It didn't take long for Shang Qinghua to realize that the Winter spirit favored that clearing; whether it was where he preferred to practice his frost patterns or just pass the time in leisure. As Shang Qinghua wandered the forest, he found the Winter spirit there more often than not.

Shang Qinghua also found himself wandering back to the clearing as well. When the spirit wasn't anywhere in sight, he left notes or poems in the snow. He asked the trees to do their best to block the wind from blowing snow over his messages, so that they might still be there when the spirit arrived. More than anything, he wanted to learn more about the mysterious, closed off spirit.

As Shang Qinghua finished his most recent poem in the snow, the branches rustled, drawing his attention to the sounds of crunching footsteps behind him. Quickly, he made his way out of the clearing, ducking behind the trees as the spirit came into sight.

Shang Qinghua held his breath as the spirit stopped at the writing in the snow. He had never actually seen the spirit react to his notes, only that the next time he would visit the clearing, it would be gone.

The mountain stands tall and firm, encased in a deep winter's ice.

I wonder what warmth may prevail beyond the cold summit.

The spirit's cheeks and ears flushed blue as he stared down at the poem. The woods were silent for a moment until the spirit kicked the snow, making Shang Qinghua's work disappear, before stomping away to a tree at the opposite edge of the clearing.

Suppressing a sigh, Shang Qinghua tried to not let the spirit's rejection get the better of him.

The next time Shang Qinghua returned to the clearing, there was a note left for him in the snow. He almost passed by it without a thought, assuming it was an old one of his, until he stopped, seeing his last message not too far away and unburied.

What is your name?

In a different handwriting, much more hurried and scrawled in the snow—

Mobei-Jun.

Shang Qinghua let out a breath, finding it difficult to contain his excitement. *Finally*, a name, just as beautiful and powerful as the spirit himself.

"Mobei-Jun." Shang Qinghua couldn't help but test the name out loud. He laughed, letting himself sit back in the snow—next to Mobei-Jun's name—and the first note he'd ever left for Shang Qinghua. He wanted to memorize the way the spirit wrote, the loops and curves of his name, before a winter's breeze blew it away for good.

"Mobei-Jun, eyes as clear as ice. Snow under the sun's first light, Shadows cast under a full moon's glow. The crack of fresh ice, The roar of an avalanche. Mobei-Jun!"

Shang Qinghua laughed again, letting himself fall back fully into the snow. Behind him, a twig cracked at the treeline. Turning his head as far as he could, he watched as the hem of a robe vanished into the woods, accompanied by the chime of icicles.

A part of him assumed that he should feel embarrassed, but the joy of finally knowing Mobei-Jun's name was so overwhelming he laid his head back and let the midday sun warm his face.

After learning the spirit's name, Shang Qinghua began seeing Mobei-Jun more often in the clearing. The companionship was welcome as he hunched over parchment with a brush, testing lines and

muttering to himself as he worked through his latest pieces. Mobei-Jun would always stay around the clearing, weaving frost and icicles through the trees and branches. Occasionally, Shang Qinghua would call out a line to Mobei-Jun, who would give him a grunt in approval or not.

When he finished his work, Mobei-Jun joined Shang Qinghua in the center of the clearing. After a moment, Shang Qinghua leaned into him, still scribbling down lines. Mobei-Jun didn't push him away, like he would have when they had first met. Instead, Mobei-Jun shifted beneath him to let Shang Qinghua sit comfortably and let his hand rest in his hair as the other man continued writing.

"Warm..."

Shang Qinghua looked up, feeling the rumble of Mobei-Jun's voice from where he rested against him. He caught the smallest of smiles on Mobei-Jun's lips and Shang Qinghua returned it with a grin.

"Hm?"

"You're warm..."

Shang Qinghua couldn't help but laugh, looking back at his parchment.

"Of course I'm warm, all mortals are."

Mobei-Jun only hummed, his hand continuing to run through Shang Qinghua's hair.

Shang Qinghua raced through the trees, Mobei-Jun's hand grasped tightly in his. It wasn't difficult for the winter spirit to keep up with him; as a matter of fact, Shang Qinghua assumed Mobei-Jun was slowing down his pace to keep pace with him.

"Only a little bit further!" Shang Qinghua spared a glance behind him, only to see Mobei-Jun's eyes on him and not on the path ahead of them. He looked away quickly, feeling the blush; not caused by the harsh winter's wind, creep up his cheeks.

Getting used to such looks was not something Shang Qinghua had ever expected to have to do. His life had always been solitary, any company fleeting. No one ever stayed for long in his life until he had stumbled upon Mobei-Jun.

Shang Qinghua slowed his pace, the treeline coming into sight. He brightened at the sight of green, grinning back at Mobei-Jun before pulling off his boots and winter cloak, dropping them in the snow and running out into the grass. He heard Mobei-Jun call out to him in surprise and stopped, turning around, not being able to help but laugh.

The grass was still damp beneath his feet from the snow that had been on top of it for months. In the center of the clearing, a tall wintersweet tree grew, its red buds blooming despite the chill that still remained in the air. Shang Qinghua made his way back to the edge of the clearing where Mobei-Jun watched him.

"I'll ruin the grass," he murmured when Shang Qinghua held out his hands for the spirit to take. "This one doesn't mix well with the living."

Shang Qinghua took his hands, smiling sadly as he ran his thumbs over Mobei-Jun's knuckles. "You mix well with me."

Mobei-Jun's eyes lifted from their joined hands, his meeting Shang Qinghua's as he allowed himself to be gently pulled into the clearing. Frost spread from his feet onto the grass, but Shang Qinghua didn't give him room to hesitate, bringing him to the center of the clearing.

The Wintersweet tree lifted its branches for Shang Qinghua, allowing the two of them to stand within its bough. A branch lowered itself next to Shang Qinghua's shoulder. He let go of Mobei-Jun's hands as the tree allowed him to break the branch off. Going up on his toes, he placed the branch around the spirit's head, bending it to fit him.

Mobei-Jun stood completely still as the branch was laid in his hair, the red blooms brilliant against his black locks and pale skin. Shang Qinghua's hands lingered next to his face as Mobei-Jun's hands came to rest on his waist, pulling him closer.

"Warmth so unfamiliar until now, The sun has never been brighter. I may be blind from beauty."

Hardly giving him time to finish the verse, Mobei-Jun's lips were upon Shang Qinghua's, swallowing the words, keeping it only between them. Every part of him pressed against Mobei-Jun felt as if it was crafted to be there—his waist meant for Mobei-Jun's hands, his lips slotted into Mobei-Jun's so perfectly that it would not matter if he were to ever kiss another being again.

When Mobei-Jun broke the kiss, his hands moving from Shang Qinghua's waist to cup his face, Shang Qinghua knew what was done between them was truly irreversible; there was no way he could exist as he did before, without Mobei-Jun's love. "Marry me," Shang Qinghua whispered.

"With what officiant? With what banquet and music? With what witness?" Mobei-Jun's thumbs brushed over Shang Qinghua's brows and down to his cheeks.

"Who is more official than the sun in the sky, more bountiful than the trees around us, more musical than the rushing river? Who better to witness than ourselves?" Shang Qinghua couldn't take his eyes off Mobei-Jun's face, watching for every twinge of an eyebrow, every tilt of his lips.

"Then tomorrow. Marry me tomorrow," Mobei-Jun breathed.

"That's too far away, who knows what can happen between then and now."

Mobei-Jun huffed a laugh at Shang Qinghua's complaint, but nodded, pressing a kiss against Shang Qinghua's forehead. "In one hour. With the setting sun as the officiant, the river to provide the music and the trees to bring a banquet. With ourselves to bear witness."

The sun set the sky aflame as Shang Qinghua met back with Mobei-Jun under the Wintersweet tree. A few miles away, the ice had broken over a river, the soft rush of fresh water accompanying them. Their robes were the same ones they had always worn, lacking the red and gold of tradition. No veil sat upon either of their heads, their faces plain with the exception of the shining blue huadian between Mobei-Jun's brow.

With a bundle of wintersweet blooms in hand, Shang Qinghua knelt beside Mobei-

Jun, making two bows and facing each other for the third.

Before he could fully lower himself the third time, Mobei-Jun spoke,

"Qinghua... I will not be able to stay here forever. It will be Spring soon, and where Winter goes I will go—"

"And where you will go, so will I," Shang Qinghua interrupted him, straightening his back from his half bow. "If existing in only the coldest of winters means existing with you, then I will go. No matter what happens, I will go where you do."

Mobei-Jun's eyes widened and he nodded. Together, they completed the final bow.

Shang Qinghua stood with Mobei-Jun, who spent no time pulling him in for a kiss. He couldn't help but deepen it, grabbing handfuls of Mobei-Jun's robes and pulling him closer. The branches of the Wintersweet tree shook, ruby red petals falling around them as Mobei-Jun held him in an embrace, and Shang Qinghua willed him internally to not let him go.

Life continued on the same as it always had for Shang Qinghua and Mobei-Jun. As Winter moved to Spring, Shang Qinghua packed up his sparse belongings for a new winter elsewhere with Mobei-Jun.

In the company of Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua hardly found himself missing the other seasons. The sun shone just as warmly as it did in summer when Mobei-Jun looked at him, and the flowers and berries that bloomed in the winter were just as beautiful

compared to those of spring.

As the seasons turned, they found themselves back in winter under their Wintersweet tree. Shang Qinghua spent the day—as any other—beneath the blooms, parchment and brush in hand. It didn't shock him that they had eventually come back to this tree after so much time away.

It wasn't until the usually peaceful silence of Winter turned eerie that Shang Qinghua realized anything was wrong. Looking up from the parchment in his lap, he realized that Mobei-Jun was no longer in the clearing. Setting his parchment and brush aside, Shang Qinghua found his husband's footprints in the snow, leading away from the clearing.

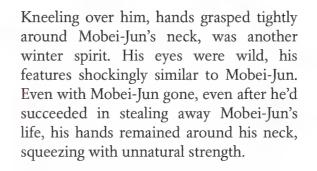
"Mobei...?" Shang Qinghua called into the forest, hoping Mobei-Jun had stayed closer to their clearing.

Shang Qinghua's call was answered with a shout and he took off into the woods faster than he ever had in his mortal life. The forest was unnaturally still as Shang Qinghua pushed branches from his path. Instead of moving from his path as they had always done, he felt them snag at his clothes, slowing him and holding him back. Birds flew from the trees as he rushed through the forest, familiar pines changing to bare branches.

The snow deepened as Shang Qinghua ran, causing him to stumble, entrapping his knees and thighs. Shang Qinghua trudged forward—forcing himself forward—until he sank again, this time up to his chest. Letting out a shout of frustration, he grabbed at the ground in front of him, pulling himself from the deep snow.

This was not his husband's snow. Shang Qinghua *knew* his husband's snow, the way the sun hit it and the way it glistened blue into orange in the light of the fading sun as it set. Clouds covered the sun above him as Shang Qinghua caught his breath. Lifting his head, the breath was stolen from his lungs once again.

Mobei-Jun's eyes stared up at the sky from where he lay on the ground. Their vibrant blue had dimmed, along with the blue of his huadian. His hair that was always so smooth between his fingers and always shone in the midday sun was dull, splayed out around his head like the ungodly roots of a tree. His skin, once luminescent, was pallid; everything that made him alive, made him *Mobei-Jun*, sucked away.



Shang Qinghua barely heard the scream that was ripped from his throat. He hardly heard the other spirit's struggle as the trees took hold of him, pulling at his limbs and clothes as he was wrenched from Mobei-Jun's body. His sharp nails left bloody lines along Mobei-Jun's neck as he refused to let go. Shang Qinghua could not take his eyes off his husband's body as the other spirit fought the trees from dragging him away into the dark of the forest, his screams mixing with Shang Qinghua's own.

Shang Qinghua didn't notice when both screams faded—when his throat became hoarse and his tears froze on his cheeks.

It wasn't until the sun had descended below the horizon that Shang Qinghua came back to himself slowly. First, with the feeling of the snow dampening his robes, then, with the numbness of his fingers clutching the snow. The cold turned to a painful heat as he tried to move them again.

Hauling himself to his feet, Shang Qinghua stumbled the last couple of feet to Mobei-Jun's corpse, falling back to his knees. When he took Mobei-Jun's hand in his, the familiar cold was gone. How many times had he taken this hand in his, felt the creases and calluses on the palm, pressed a reassuring kiss to the knuckles? How many times had he felt this hand cup his face in the most quiet and intimate of moments, felt the fingers run through his hair?

How would he live knowing he would never know Mobei-Jun's touch again in his life?

Shang Qinghua did not remember how long it took for him to find the feeling in his legs again. When he hooked his arms under Mobei-Jun's shoulders, pulling his husband's corpse from its snowy tomb, time fell away with the sounds of the forest around him. His own footsteps felt muffled, far away, as if they belonged to some other being.

He didn't know how long it took before the Wintersweet tree came back into view. The red of the blooms were blurry dots in the distance until Shang Qinghua remembered to blink, forcing his mind back into focus. They didn't hold the same vibrancy that Shang Qinghua remembered, standing beneath them with Mobei-Jun not so long ago.

Mobei-Jun's body rested in the center of the clearing as Shang Qinghua knelt in the snow once again. Clearing the snow from the base of the Wintersweet was simple work; he cleared his mind once again and his vision blurred, ignoring the stinging heat of the snow and the purpling at the tips of his fingers.

The true bitter work began once the snow was cleared and Shang Qinghua's hands hit dirt and rock. The earth was frozen from months of winter that Mobei-Jun had worked hard to maintain and decorate. The last winter that he had helped along, taking over the crisp winds of Autumn and turning them to biting winds—biting winds that had never felt painful to Shang Qinghua. Winds that would nip at his nose and ears while Mobei-Jun was in another part of the forest.

Another wave of agonizing realization



Life Eternal Life Eternal

crashed over him, stinging at his eyes and catching in his throat. It was impossible to hold back the gasping sob that finally broke free of him, his wail echoing out into the emptiness of the woods.

Never before had Shang Qinghua missed feeling so numb, wanting every emotion pulling at his heart and his soul to vanish so he wouldn't have to undergo such pain. Why him? Why was he the one always damned to choking loneliness? To be scorned and disregarded by every living being for the majority of his life until he met Mobei-Jun? Until Mobei-Jun made him understand what it was to be known and loved, wholly and unconditionally?

Flexing his fingers, Shang Qinghua dug back into the frozen dirt—the pain in his hands driving away the pain that had taken over his heart and mind—pushing it aside and focusing solely on the way the dirt got under his nails and the feel of the rocks that scraped his fingers. He let out a deep breath and began to dig again.

Immeasurable time passed, and Shang Qinghua had dug out a reasonable grave for his husband, where his head could rest beneath the branches of their wintersweet tree. Without a shovel or a spade, his fingertips were bloodied and his nails torn.

It didn't take much for him to wipe the blood away in the snow and ignore the hurt in favor of cleaning Mobei-Jun's wounds. He ran a comb through his hair one last time before taking the utmost care to deliver Mobei-Jun to his resting spot beneath the tree. By the time Shang Qinghua had finished filling in the grave he had just dug, the sun had risen once more.

He had no incense to offer him, nor any paper money. They had never worried about being bothered by social faux pas, living together and needing no one but the other.

Shang Qinghua could offer his words. His entire life, it was all he had to offer. He had never been extremely wealthy or handsome, but his words were always enough for Mobei-Jun.

Opening his mouth to speak, he waited for his words to come to him, but found nothing. His throat was dry and his breath caught, nothing coming forth for Mobei-Jun's grave. All that came out was a choked gasp, deep and heaving as his head drooped, and he knelt in the dirt of his husband's grave.

Caught up in a fresh wave of tears, Shang Qinghua didn't notice the spots of red appearing over the grave until he felt something soft land on his head. For a moment, he could have sworn it was Mobei-Jun's hand, as if he could hear his voice calling him.

Shang Qinghua wiped his tears quickly, looking up as the wintersweet tree and its branches shook again, petals falling into his hair and onto the grave. Another sob crawled its way up his throat and he bent over again, his forehead pressed against the fresh dirt of the grave.

Even if he had nothing to give Mobei-Jun, his grave would not remain undecorated.

Falling asleep beside Mobei-Jun's grave, Shang Qinghua's dreams were filled with memories. Mobei's arms were around him—his voice in his ears, as if nothing had happened.

"Qinghua..." Mobei-Jun's voice was distant and Shang Qinghua only shook his head. He pressed closer but Mobei-Jun was gone. When Shang Qinghua opened his eyes again, it was to complete darkness.

"Qinghua..." Mobei-Jun's voice sounded again as he sat up, trying to see through the darkness where his husband's voice was coming from.

"Mobei-Jun?" He felt around—completely blinded—until he touched a wall of solid stone. Was he in a cave? "Mobei-Jun?"

He continued along the wall slowly, feeling for any turns or breaks in it.

"Shang Qinghua!" Mobei-Jun's voice turned urgent and Shang Qinghua took off running without a thought. His breath and footsteps echoed off the walls until the floor fell out from under him. He landed on the ground, his back hitting hard stone. Shang Qinghua was jarred, all the breath in his lungs forced from them until he heard Mobei-Jun again further in the darkness.

"Qinghua!"

"Shang Qinghua!"

"Qinghua, find me!"

Shang Qinghua's head spun with voices mixed with Mobei-Jun's, unable to tell where they were coming from. Dragging himself to his knees, Shang Qinghua shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut tight.

"Mobei, Mobei please, I can't find you, tell me where you are!"

With a rush of wind and an earth-shaking

boom, the voices around him coalesced into one.

"Below."

The voices shuddered through him, and Shang Qinghua awoke with a start—still clutching the dirt of his husband's grave—his body sore and aching.

Shang Qinghua sat up very slowly. He gathered his hair to the back of his head, tying it into a neat bun, before rising to his feet. He spared Mobei-Jun's grave one last glance, plucking a branch from the wintersweet tree and laying it on the freshly turned earth.

If below was where he would have to go to find his husband's soul—below it would be.

There were no grand signs pointing the way to the Underworld.

At the edge of the clearing, the trees moved their branches from his path, guiding him to where he would need to go.

With Mobei-Jun gone, winter was already thawing, with the signs of an early Spring on the way. Green could already be seen sprouting beneath melted snow, resolute as ever to continue living.

Shang Qinghua didn't focus on how long he walked or how much his feet hurt. It didn't matter to him how many times the sun had risen and set since Mobei-Jun's death. All of it was inconsequential compared to the undertaking he was determined to succeed in.

When he arrived at the edge of the forest, the trees closed behind him, and the path he had taken vanished. A feeling of foreboding fell over him as he looked back over his shoulder, the forest now painfully unfamiliar from all the years he had spent there. The foreboding feeling turned uneasy, then into panic as his breath quickened. If this all failed, would he be able to make it back to their clearing? That is, if he made it out alive at all? Was he to be forever separated from Mobei-Jun physically and spiritually?

Shang Qinghua's knees shook and his face felt cold and numb. He slowly knelt, catching his breath. Steeling himself, he shut his eyes, focusing on his purpose.

Mobei-Jun.

He was close. He couldn't let this all be for nothing.

Rising back to his feet, Shang Qinghua faced the pitch black cave in front of him, roughly hewn from the side of a mountain. There was no seeing beyond its shadows, but there was no doubt in his mind that Mobei-Jun's soul—with thousands of others—rested beyond its entrance in the underworld.

The cavern itself lacked the usual dampness most had, the air feeling cold and dry against his skin. Vines that were green at the entrance slowly browned the further he walked, until the smell of the dying plants were almost unbearable.

Around him, the darkness played tricks on his eyes, shadows moving and light glinting off nothing. Shang Qinghua stopped, looking around. Being alone was a familiar feeling, and one that would be difficult for him to shake. Knowing that, Shang Qinghua realized he was not alone. In a flash, two figures emerged from the shadows each armed with their own sword.

Male and female, the two spirits looked to be mirror images of each other with veils covering their faces and beauty marks beneath each of their right eyes.

"No mortal is allowed Below," the woman said.

"Turn back or join the Damned," the man finished.

"I'm here for my beloved." Shang Qinghua didn't dare breathe, their unearthly presence overwhelming. "I will not leave until I plead my case with the Lords of the Underworld."

"Then plead." The veiled man moved to strike and Shang Qinghua tensed, shutting his eyes.

"Please!" Shang Qinghua's voice cracked, and he could feel the sword stop centimeters from his throat. "Please... He was—is—my everything. I am nothing without him. He is my sky and my stars, the earth beneath my feet, the air I breathe. Without him, I am damned either way. What being would resign themselves to living without feeling whole?"

When Shang Qinghua opened his eyes, the man's gaze was locked on him. His fist clenched around his sword, until he sheathed it and looked at the woman. The two conversed silently, and slowly, the man stepped aside, the tunnel opening up once more.

"We shall allow you the chance you seek, Poet," the veiled woman said. Her stare burned, as if she could read the very core of Shang Qinghua's soul. The veiled man continued to avoid eye contact, choosing a spot on the cavern wall to find interesting.

Shang Qinghua opened his mouth to speak, but the veiled woman only held up her hand, stopping him.

"Do not thank us yet. The next guardian below will not be as forgiving. The Lord's heart is especially cold. We would be doing you a service not allowing you further. However..." She paused, looking over at her mirror image, the man still focused on the cavern wall and ignoring the both of them. "However, your story strikes a chord with us. Perhaps the Lords will find it just as moving."

The veiled woman stepped aside as well, opening the path fully. "We wish you the best of luck, Poet. May your love prevail."

Shang Qinghua gave the two spirits a bow of gratitude, before hurrying down the path.

The caverns carried him further below the world's surface, the road beneath him steep, until he could no longer feel the watchful eyes of the veiled spirits. It wasn't long until he was met with the sound of rushing water. The path dropped abruptly into a cliff, with a raging river below.

Shang Qinghua stopped himself short, his feet right at the edge of the cliff. While the waters seemed dangerous and fast, at a closer look, the patterns in the waves were hypnotic and welcoming. A wave crashed against the cliff face and the spray caught Shang Qinghua off guard, the water hitting his face and lips and the salty droplets of water landing on his tongue.

Why was he here again? Why had he ventured so far below ground to begin with?

Shang Qinghua shivered against the cold of the cavern as he remembered.

Mobei.

He tripped over his feet as he backed away from the cliff.

"Please, please, I can't forget him..." He fell to his knees before the water, head bowed. "Please let me through to him. I would rather the Lords of the Underworld damn me to hell themselves than ever forget Mobei-Jun. Even if I can never return home—even if I fail—I cannot forget him."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Shang Qinghua couldn't hold back the tears that dripped down his cheeks and into the river.

The rushing echoing through the cavern quieted as he lifted his head, carefully wiping his eyes with his sleeve. In front of him, the river had receded, revealing steps



that led down the cliffside and to a bridge spanning the river to the other side of the cave.

Within the echoing drips and the trickle of the river he heard: "Then go Poet. Do your best to win the Lord of Death's favor."

Climbing to his feet, Shang Qinghua nodded, giving another bow of gratitude to the river. He steeled himself to cross the bridge, but the river stayed calm beneath the stone under his feet.

Once he was on the solid ground of the cavern, Shang Qinghua turned around to see a wave crash against the bridge, dispersing from sight.

Beyond the river, the caverns became significantly colder as he reached the heart of the Underworld. The rush of the river behind him faded into the sound of voices, thousands of them, all speaking at once. It took all Shang Qinghua had to not stop and clap his hands over his ears, and continue forward.

A light shone from the end of the path, where the cave opened up into a massive cavern filled with spirits. At the front of the cave, a raised dais held two thrones, with a figure in green beside a figure in black.

Shang Qinghua realized he had stopped moving at the edge of the entrance, staring at the thrones. Despite the cold, he realized he was sweating, his palms uncomfortably clammy.

Stepping into the cave, every spirit was instantaneously silent, an oppressive silence falling over the gathered crowd.

Thousands of undead eyes bored into Shang Qinghua as he pressed forward. It

didn't take much for the spirits to clear a path to the thrones, whispers filling the air around him. Shang Qinghua risked a glance upwards, finally close enough to see the two figures on the thrones more clearly.

Even from a distance, it was easy to say the two immortals were peerless beauties.

The first immortal, Lord Luo, sat on a throne made of black stone, his expression impassive and arms crossed. His black robes were made of the finest silk and embroidered in red and silver, the cut of his clothing emphasizing his imposing stature. His wild hair was hardly contained in a high ponytail, secured with a silver guan.

Beside him, Lord Shen seemed every bit his opposite. Dressed in lush greens and whites, his hair was smooth without a single strand out of place. His throne was carved from a dark wood and wrapped in brown, dying vines. A fan was held in a tight grip, covering the lower portion of his face; only his stern eyes gave Shang Qinghua any idea of what he may be feeling.

Finally reaching the base of the dais, Shang Qinghua dropped to his knees, prostrating himself against the cold cavern floor. Above him, someone snapped their fingers and the whispers of the ghosts were once again sucked from the room, leaving them in silence.

"Mortal. Why have you entered our domain?"

Not lifting his head from the floor, Shang Qinghua imagined the voice matching the severe eyes of Lord Shen. "This one has journeyed here seeking the generosity of Lord Luo and Lord Shen, so he may return with his lost beloved." Shang Qinghua kept his forehead to the floor as gasps rang out

from the spirits around him.

A fist was slammed against the arm of a throne, once again silencing them.

"How *dare you*, mortal, think yourself significant enough to be so bold to request such a—" Lord Shen's voice cut off and Shang Qinghua squeezed his eyes closed, waiting for the verbal beratement to continue.

"Mortal."

Shang Qinghua slowly lifted his head, meeting Lord Luo's gaze. His eyes were dark, with a stare that felt like it penetrated his soul.

Lord Luo broke eye contact, looking back to his husband. "Let us hear him out."

Lord Shen's grip on his fan made the wood creak and Shang Qinghua averted his gaze back to the ground. Even as Lord Shen lowered his voice, Shang Qinghua could still make out the conversation between the two.

"Binghe, you can't be seriously considering this," Lord Shen hissed.

"Shizun, please. Give him a chance, I want to hear what he has to say. I believe it will be worth our time."

Glancing up, Shang Qinghua could see Lord Luo grasping Lord Shen's hand, looking deep into his eyes. Lord Shen finally glanced away, flicking his fan back out to cover his face.

"If it is what Husband wants, then we will give this mortal a chance." Lord Shen cleared his throat and Shang Qinghua lifted his head again. "We will hear you out,

mortal. Speak from the heart. Sway us to your side. If you can."

Shang Qinghua felt the air leave his lungs as he nodded, rising from his bow to rest back on his knees. He cleared his throat, gripping the front of his robes to hide his sweaty palms.

"Everything I will say has been said before. Even my tale of love and loss is not one terribly new, or unique. I am a poet—not one of spectacular nature—who lived his life alone and unremarkable. Until I found my beloved. A spirit of winter, Mobei-Jun, taken far too early from this mortal plane.

"Before Mobei-Jun, there was nothing—only empty space and empty words, meaningless sentiments any being could conceive. After... After, I could see the stars in the sky, the moon and the sun, and finally understood. He made me see the world in a way I never expected to and find beauty everywhere I looked.

"Even if my request were denied, my love not strong nor my words beautiful enough to sway the Lords of the Underworld, I would rather be damned than return without my love. Without him, the winter is dull and harsh. The wind bites in ways I had forgotten it could. The moon is gone from the sky with the stars. The snow does not glitter under the sun's rays. There is nothing for me to return to above, without Mobei-Jun.

"Please, hear this small mortal's wish. Allow Mobei-Jun to live out his natural life, continue his work decorating winter and bringing beauty to the mortal world. That is all I ask."

Shaking, Shang Qinghua lifted his hand to his face, attempting to dry his eyes. He did not remember when he began to cry, only that his face was now wet.

On the dais, Lord Luo also wiped his face, turning his watery eyes to his husband with a look of pleading. Lord Shen averted his gaze, only to glance down at Shang Qinghua and back to his husband.

"If Binghe wishes it to be..." Snapping his fingers, a shade appeared before Shang Qinghua and he tripped over himself getting to his feet.

Before him, looking more bewildered than he had ever had in life, was Mobei-Jun. More tears welled in Shang Qinghua's eyes as Mobei-Jun reached towards him. Shang Qinghua extended his hand out to him, only stopping when Lord Shen cleared his throat.

"But this boon is not without any caveats. If your love is true and your faith in us well placed, you will return to the mortal world—with Mobei-Jun following behind, without turning back. If you do, he shall return to our domain. What is love and life without faith, after all?" Lord Shen flipped his fan closed, staring down at Shang Qinghua. "Do you agree, Poet?"

Shang Qinghua bowed once again before the two Lords. "This one is humbled by your generosity." Straightening, he looked at Mobei-Jun. "I will see you on the surface."

Mobei-Jun, still silenced by death, only nodded and motioned for Shang Qinghua to take the lead.

As he began the walk from the cavern, Shang Qinghua's legs shook, notably more so than during his journey to the underworld. It was more difficult than he imagined, keeping his head forward. After everything, all he wanted—needed—was to be able to soak in the image of his husband, alive and well once again. Behind him, there were no sounds of footsteps as he crossed the river, the rushing water calm beneath the bridge.

Beyond the bridge, the veiled spirits were nowhere in sight. He paused, hoping to hear anything behind him to reassure him of Mobei-Jun's presence—the swish of his robes, the jingle of his jewelry. Still, there was nothing. Shang Qinghua forced himself to press onward, but it was hard to ignore the thoughts creeping into the back of his mind. What if Lord Shen had lied? What if Lord Luo's sympathy was faked and when Shang Qinghua reached the exit, there had been no one with him the entire time?

Soon light reappeared, the exit in sight. The back of Shang Qinghua's neck prickled with anticipation, goosebumps trailing up his arms. How would he be able to tell if the Lords had lied, playing him and his misery for their own amusement? If he just looked, he could reassure himself. At the edge of the cave, Shang Qinghua turned.

"Qinghua..."

Behind him, the cave was empty. Only the whisper of his name on the wind, and a set of frosted footprints, stopped mid-step in the dirt behind him.



SIMPLE, UNINTERRUPTED

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun & An Yue

Characters

Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua, An Yue

Tags

Post-canon, Established Relationship, Demon Culture and Mythology, Mild Angst

Summary

Having married the man of his dreams, Shang Qinghua is tasked with hosting the Festival of the Lament for the first time in decades. Now he has to plan a festival (which would be easier if Mobei-Jun would help him), try not to be overshadowed by his dead mother-in-law, and find Mobei-Jun the perfect gift. That's a lot to ask of one cowardly ex-web-novelist! But he loves Mobei-Jun enough to try...

Author:

SEVENTHSTAR

Beta(s):

Illustrated by:

FEELSLIKEFIRE

TRASHIE

Shang Qinghua wakes cold and alone.

He rolls over instinctively, reaching out, but the space where Mobei-Jun should be is empty. Shang Qinghua rubs the sleep from his eyes. The sheets aren't even cold anymore. His husband must have been gone awhile.

My husband...

The words still sound foreign to him. Shang Qinghua never thought he would marry. He never imagined he would willingly choose to accept something as dangerous as love. He's always been prepared to abandon everything to survive. Loyalty and respect were meaningless to him. Who cared about loyalty, when Shang Qinghua himself was loyal to no one? Who cared if people didn't respect him, when Shang Qinghua didn't respect himself?

Now he's chained. Now he has something to lose.

All day, Shang Qinghua labored to supervise the display of the previous Mobei-Jun's consort. The statue was carved in the bowels of the palace; moving it to the top of a tower was no mean feat! Especially with the knowledge that if that statue got damaged, it would be an omen that hung over his head for the rest of his reign. In the end, Shang Qinghua managed it, and the sheer exhaustion he feels ought to guarantee him a good night's sleep.

Instead he's been plagued by nightmares: the statue of An Yue reduced to rubble, cracks in her stone body turned to bloody wounds in Mobei-Jun's skin.

Shang Qinghua grumbles under his breath about the cold and the dark and his husband's unkindness as he shrugs on a cloak and shoves his feet into fur-lined slippers. He snatches up the robe of MobeiJun's he's been mending, too; it'll be good to have something to do with his hands.

He shuffles through hallways of stone and ice. He's lived here long enough to tell the seemingly identical corridors apart, and to find the green-blue glow of the algae lamps comforting. Once he reaches the tower, Shang Qinghua forgoes the endless spiral staircase in favor of his sword.

It's a beautiful chamber. The double doors are made of silver and carved with the names of all the royal consorts who have preceded him. The room is circular, capped with an enormous dome of transparent ice. The statue of An Yue sits perfectly centered below the dome, cast in silver by the overhead moon.

And at her feet is Mobei-Jun, staring up at her face—near identical to his own—with an expression that Shang Qinghua cannot parse.

"My king!"

"Qinghua."

Shang Qinghua tries to sit down and Mobei-Jun shifts him into his lap. He's careful about it. He's careful about everything, now, as if Shang Qinghua's bones are hollow like a bird's.

Shang Qinghua follows Mobei-Jun's gaze and looks up at An Yue. From this angle she is terrifying. The statue is so lifelike that Shang Qinghua can almost hear An Yue's head full of writhing snakes hissing, her outstretched claws poised to close around an unsuspecting throat.

Shang Qinghua doesn't know if she was a good mother. He's always been afraid to ask

"Well, it's done now," he says. He laughs

nervously. "You're stuck with me."

Mobei-Jun's hold on him tightens. Apparently work on his statue has already begun. Someday Mobei-Jun's heir will marry, and Shang Qinghua's stone effigy will take An Yue's place. *Unlucky to display a statue of someone who's still living*, the ice demons say. *It calls the rifts*.

Shang Qinghua isn't sure what that means, but he definitely doesn't want to have any statues of himself on display while he's around to see them.

"Tch." Mobei-Jun presses his cold mouth against the top of Shang Qinghua's head. "You did well."

"Moving heavy and fragile objects is An Ding's specialty." Getting the statue centered had taken hours—to say nothing of the ordeal it was getting it up the stairs. Shang Qinghua falls back against Mobei-Jun's chest. He feels trapped like this. He feels safe like this. "Now what?"

Mobei-Jun says nothing.

"I mean, it's official now." Shang Qinghua takes out his mending and stabs into the robe with the needle. "What's next? Is there more stuff I have to do?"

"Next," Mobei-Jun says, slowly, "you will hold the Festival of the Lament."

"The what." Shang Qinghua's heart overflows with dread. "Are you sure?"

Are you sure you want me to be your consort? he wants to ask. Are you sure you want to entrust me with your kingdom and your subjects and your money and your heart? Didn't you see what I did to the sect that raised me? To my own disciples?

To the world I made?

"Yes," Mobei-Jun says with all the gravitas of one born to rule.

They both fall silent. Shang Qinghua closes his eyes, acutely aware of the way his heart is pounding, loud enough he knows Mobei-Jun can hear it.

"It is traditionally the consort's duty," Mobei-Jun says. "My mother was not permitted."

"Did you..." Shang Qinghua trails off, musters some courage. "Was she a good mother?"

"Yes."

"And you loved her?"

"Yes."

Mobei-Jun's silence is heavy with grief.

"What's a Lament?" Shang Qinghua grips Mobei-Jun's arm where it rests around his waist. "My king, you have to explain things. With words."

Instead of answering, Mobei-Jun manhandles him so that he's straddling Mobei-Jun's lap, facing him. The half-mended robe gets squashed between them. Mobei-Jun is barely dressed, wearing the string of spirit stones Shang Qinghua braided into his hair this morning still, his expression soft like Shang Qinghua's ignorance is endearing.

"The Lament," Mobei-Jun says slowly, "is the story of the world, passed down for thousands of years. All demons know it."

"Oh."

"Mother taught it to me. In Ancient Abyssal."

"You can speak Ancient Abyssal?"

"Of course," Mobei-Jun replies. "Mother

was an Abyssal demon. From the line of An Hong."

Shang Qinghua doesn't remember writing any of this.

"This king will recite for you, if you wish."

"I don't speak Ancient Abyssal."

Mobei-Jun gives him a tiny smile. "This king will translate," he says.

"Sure."

Mobei-Jun's hand finds his.

"This is a story from when the world was still new," he says, "from when the Abyss ran rampant, and the opening and closing of the rifts oppressed all demons. No one could live without fear of being swallowed or sacrificed, until the day came when a rift opened near a certain village. Because in that village lived Tang Lu, a demoness of unfathomable courage and unbreakable will..."

Until the day Tang Lu fell into the Abyss, no demon had made a blood sacrifice of themselves and lived to tell the tale. In those days the sacrifices were sometimes treated with great honor, and sometimes driven out like dogs. Rich or poor, weak or strong, no one was safe, for no one knew whose blood would appease the rift best.

And no one knows what Tang Lu's village would have done to her, for she did not ask. When she saw the darkness of the rift she told no one. The bells were not rung and the alarm was not sounded. Tang Lu bared her teeth as if she meant to tear the Abyss to pieces, and flung herself into its depths with her eyes wide open.

She fell a long, long, long way. She suffered a thousand wounds on her way down. She lay on the floor of the Abyss in a pool of blood, her body cold and still as death.

But though Death was a formidable foe, Tang Lu was more formidable still.



In the old days, Mobei-Jun explained to him, the sacrifices were called brides.

The ice demons of old believed that demons made better sacrifices if they were heartbroken. So once some unfortunate soul was chosen, they were stripped of everything. First they ceded all their material possessions: their cache of supplies for the winter, their jewelry, their weapons. Then they were divorced, and separated from their former spouses. Finally, naked and alone, they were required to destroy anything their spouse had gifted them with their own hands.

Only then were they permitted the honor of becoming a blood sacrifice, whose death might close the rift.

What a horrible fate! Shang Qinghua is grateful that he wasn't born in that time, because he knows he would have definitely gotten sacrificed. The System would have dropped his unlucky ass into the body of a happily married demon slated for death.

The structure of the festival isn't too complicated, at least. The guests come in pairs, half of them hunters, half of them brides.

("I'm guessing I'm the bride?"

"Qinghua is welcome to hunt."

Shang Qinghua snorted. Like he was going to volunteer to go kill things when the snow was hip-deep!)

The festival opens with a morning hunt to represent the bounty of the kingdom, now that the Abyss isn't periodically eating whole villages. The brides prepare gifts, to honor the sacrifices of all the brides before. Then both parties reunite. The game is prepared, the gifts are given, and the whole thing ends with a feast and drunken revelry.

Preparations for the festival are meant to begin the next day, and Shang Qinghua; head full of everything Mobei-Jun told him the night before, spends the morning in a state of intense anxiety.

It's just event planning. He's done it before. One measly festival can't be harder to plan than the entire Immortal Alliance Conference.

Admittedly *that* event went pretty off the rails from what Shang Qinghua intended. But that's Shen Qingqiu's fault! Everywhere he goes, canon diverges!

Some people would argue that the fact that An Yue never hosted the Festival of the Lament makes Shang Qinghua's task easier. Shang Qinghua disagrees. If An Yue had held the Festival of the Lament, he could study it, pick it apart. Inevitably he would uncover some flaw he could improve on. But there is no competing with a festival that was only held in people's imaginations.

Nor is Shang Qinghua anything in comparison to An Yue. An Yue loved her son so much she consigned herself to being the prisoner of a demon she hated. She gave up her family, her home, her husband. And since she's dead, she can never do anything to tarnish the purity of that sacrifice.

Shang Qinghua, on the other hand, is alive, well, and perfectly capable of fucking up. He's probably the only married man in the world who longs for a meddling mother-inlaw.

He and Mobei-Jun have to meet with the committee of clan ministers and elders about the festival. Shang Qinghua's attended meetings like this before, but normally he takes notes and only speaks when spoken to. Today he takes his seat beside Mobei-Jun, in an equally fancy chair, and realizes that everyone is looking at him expectantly. Even Mobei-Jun!

"The Festival of the Lament will be held," Mobei-Jun says. Several elders gasp out loud.

Shang Qinghua swallows.

"An auspicious way to start your reign, your majesty," Elder Zi says, misty-eyed. "Your mother, Consort An...it is a shame she was never allowed to host. It would have been magnificent."

"Songs would have been sung of it for centuries to come," another elder agrees.

"I'm sure the king will perform equally admirably," a third adds.

"Shang Qinghua will host," Mobei-Jun says.

"Your Majesty, an unsuitable Festival will invite the rifts—"

"Shang Qinghua is capable." Mobei-Jun stands up. Frost crackles up the walls as the mark on his forehead glows with killing intent. He bares his teeth in warning. "Enough. You will do as he says."

And with that frankly terrifying pronouncement, Mobei-Jun leaves. He leaves! He abandons his poor, pathetic husband to the viper's den!

What the fuck!

"Haha," Shang Qinghua says, voice shaking. He tries to pretend he's at a peak lord meeting and can't. Not even his martial siblings have ever looked at him with such incredible skepticism. *This is going to go so poorly.* "Let's get started!"

Her name was An Hong, and she had lived in the Abyss all her life.

To An Hong, the lives of the surface-dwellers—whether sacrifices or victims of slaughter—were as insects. On clear days, she would perch on the cliff's edge to watch them fall; while their corpses were picked clean by scavengers, she would drink wine and laugh. In that way she was no different than any other Abyssal.

An Hong was powerful and yet idle, beautiful and yet careless. She lived her whole life at ease—until the day she met Tang Lu.

Shang Qinghua is drowning.

That's not new. Between helping run Mobei-Jun's kingdom and handling all the logistics of Cang Qiong Mountain, he's always drowning. Composing guest lists, arranging to have chambers aired, having meat and fruit defrosted, hanging strings of night pearls in the halls...he's done it all before. He knows how to arrange a menu so that it looks impressive for demons but still has things he can stomach. He knows which artisans to commission and how to bully whoever has the nicest handwriting into writing up invitations.

The thing is...before, whenever Shang Qinghua ran into trouble, he hid behind Mobei-Jun. If anyone complained, he squeaked, "It's the king's command!" and

fled. If a decision felt too important to be made by him, he pretended to cry until whoever was asking gave up and took it to Mobei-Jun instead.

But he can't do that any more. One, because it'll make him look weak, which is a death sentence in demonic politics. And two, because Mobei-Jun won't let him.

That's not how this is supposed to work, my king! The agreement was that you'd be the rock I cowered behind for the rest of my days!

Instead Mobei-Jun is handing off tasks to Shang Qinghua left and right. At first it was just things that he always handled anyway, so Shang Qinghua wasn't too mad about it. But now Mobei-Jun is making him do things *he* usually does!

What does Shang Qinghua know about picking the locations of hunts? Absolutely nothing! But when he suggested Elder Zi consult the king, Elder Zi made it clear that the king had been consulted and that Elder was told in no uncertain terms that Shang Qinghua was in charge.

So now Shang Qinghua's desk is covered in maps of dubious accuracy. He's squinting at Northern script so elaborate it's impossible to read and trying to decide which of the literal hundreds of hunting grounds in the North is suitable.

Meanwhile Mobei-Jun lounges on the couch in front of Shang Qinghua's desk and does not help. Which reminds Shang Qinghua of his other pressing task: the gift.

The one he's supposed to present to Mobei-Jun in front of everyone. The one that'll be recorded in the annals of Northern history and used to judge him even after he's dead.

"What do you want? For your gift," Shang Qinghua adds. He waves his hands vaguely.

"What should I get you?"

Mobei-Jun shrugs.

Wildly unhelpful, Shang Qinghua thinks. He's been through the records of past gifts. Rare treasures, fearsome beast corpses, expensive jewelry—Mobei-Jun has them all already! Shang Qinghua could dig up another priceless artifact or once-in-acentury magical plant, but he knows it'll just end up gathering dust. His spoiled king doesn't care about that kind of thing.

"The hunting grounds need to be prepared."

"I know," Shang Qinghua mutters.

"This king can set a location."

There's silence as Shang Qinghua grinds his teeth so hard his jaw hurts. Oh, he can, can he? After all the fuss he's made about Shang Qinghua doing everything himself? Of course Mobei-Jun just throws that out there, without thinking about how it'll look. Mobei-Jun never thinks about the political implications. He doesn't have to.

"I've got it," Shang Qinghua lies. "It's fine, I'll figure it out tonight."

Mobei-Jun frowns at him and reaches across the desk to touch the dark circles beneath Shang Qinghua's eyes. Shang Qinghua smiles, strained.

"...Mn."

"Do you have enough knives?"

Mobei-Jun pinches his cheek. That's a no on knives, then. Shang Qinghua reaches for yet another map.

"Qinghua."

"What?" It comes out too sharp.

Mobei-Jun's expression, when Shang Qinghua dares to look, is fond. He tugs the map from Shang Qinghua's hands.

"Listen."

I don't have time for this, Shang Qinghua protests internally. Yet he's lured in by the cadence of Mobei-Jun's voice as he tells the story, by the unusual expressiveness of it. He leans in to listen.

An Hong held Tang Lu in her arms. Her body was as light as a corpse's, soaked from head to foot in blood.

The two of them looked into each other's eyes. Tang Lu was placid, while An Hong trembled; An Hong burned with desire, while Tang Lu's heart was a still pool.

"Will you leave me?" Tang Lu asked.

"I don't dare."

"Will you kill me?"

"I don't dare," An Hong said again.

Upon hearing these words, Tang Lu shed a tear—the last tear she would ever shed.

"What do you want?" An Hong asked.

"For the Abyss to be sealed forever," Tang Lu said. Mark these words! They would remake the world.

of course he's late. As he scrambles to get dressed, cursing the sheer number of layers a proper consort has to wear, he prays that the committee members fear Mobei-Jun enough that they'll wait for him to arrive. He's not stupid enough to think they respect him enough to do so otherwise.

Hair askew, he rushes to the war room. The committee is waiting for him, though none of them give him more than a glance as he takes his seat. The conversation flows around him as he lays out his scrolls and maps on the tabletop.

"—Her majesty wanted to invite her family," one elder is reminiscing.

Shang Qinghua stares down at his map, where he's marked the location of the hunt, and grinds his teeth so hard it hurts.

"The descendants of An Hong, attending a Festival of the Lament..."

"What a shame."

What a shame? Don't pretend you supported her when she was alive! It's not like An Yue was particularly beloved when she was actually around. The old Mobei-Jun constantly disrespected her. The only reason everyone is now nostalgic about her is because they're trying to get Mobei-Jun's favor.

And because Shang Qinghua makes An Yue look so much better in comparison.

"Is the king going to wear...?"

"Ah, you haven't heard? It's completely ruined."

"Shameful." Elder Zi glances at Shang Qinghua, who glares back. "Ah, but of course with Consort Shang here, such things will be problems of the past."

Shang Qinghua's supposed to announce the location of the hunt in the morning, so "Consort Shang certainly knows a lot about storage," another elder agrees.

"What are you talking about?" Shang Qinghua snaps. His nerves are at the breaking point. They scheduled a whole meeting to discuss the site of the hunt, and no one's even bothered to ask him about it yet!

"The celebration of the Lament in the Abyss is quite different," Elder Zi explains. "Consort An had a traditional cloak made for the king to wear when he was of age."

"What, and it wasn't stored properly?" Shang Qinghua says incredulously.

There's an embarrassed silence. Shang Qinghua recalls the state of some of the kingdom's vaults before he intervened and winces.

His poor husband. A gift from his mother, ruined out of carelessness. Maybe it can be salvaged somehow? Shang Qinghua knows quite a lot about clothing—the sect goes through so much of it—

Shang Qinghua tucks the idea away for later and clears his throat.

"As for the location of the hunt—"

"Very wise of you to leave it to the king," Elder Zi interrupts him with a smarmy smile. He has two rows of top teeth. There's food stuck in between them. "This one will be glad to complete the preparations."

"I'm sure you would be," Shang Qinghua says flatly.

Now everyone's staring at him. He swallows, mouth suddenly dry, blood pounding wrathfully in his ears. So Mobei-Jun just...picked a hunting ground, made an announcement to the whole committee, and didn't tell him?

So much for trusting him completely.

"I want to see the cloak," Shang Qinghua says.

A few minutes later a servant delivers a box to the war room.

The wood has rotted through in places, and the hinges snap when Shang Qinghua tries to open it. Inside is a cloak, trimmed with tundra wolf fur. It must have been pure white, once, but whoever stored it didn't do it properly. It's moth-eaten and stained, the fur ratty. It's the kind of garment even an An Ding disciple would give up as a bad job. But he can imagine what it looked like in its glory days, the fur iridescent, fluttering in the wind like a river of snow. It would suit his king perfectly.

Shang Qinghua feels a pang of professional indignation. What a waste.

He closes the lid and slides the whole box into his sleeve. Then without another word he steps out of the war room and makes for Mobei-Jun's study.

Mobei-Jun isn't there, so Shang Qinghua sits down behind the desk, hands shaking. He can't bear to think about the festival or the cloak anymore, so he takes out the robe he's been mending—one of his own this time. He's mindlessly stitching a torn hem when Mobei-Jun arrives.

Mobei-Jun stands on the other side of the desk, standing over Shang Qinghua so that his shadow falls over him. He reaches out, and Shang Qinghua keeps his hands in his lap until Mobei-Jun's hand drops.

"Qinghua."

"So, you just went ahead and decided without me?"

"It weighed on you," Mobei-Jun replies. "So

this king-"

"Oh, so you didn't trust me to do it?"

"No, I-"

"I'm not good enough?!"

"This king was trying to ease your burden," Mobei-Jun says.

"Great. That's great. Is there anything else I'm too stupid to do correctly? Maybe you should decide what gift I'm giving you, too! Let me know now!"

Shang Qinghua blinks back tears. Mobei-Jun makes a noise of frustration and comes around the desk, kneeling down so that he's not looming over Shang Qinghua. He reaches for Shang Qinghua's hand.

Shang Qinghua snatches it away before he can take it.

"Qinghua."

"Don't." He wipes at his face. "Just... don't. It's fine." He glances at Mobei-Jun's expression, at his barely downturned mouth. He can't afford to fight with Mobei-Jun now, not when he has no other allies. Besides, being mad at Mobei-Jun gives him a stomachache. He decides to make peace. "I want to hear the rest of the story."

Deep in the canyons of the Abyss An Hong walked, Tang Lu thrown over her shoulders. She walked through boiling rivers of blood, and with every step more of Tang Lu's blood dripped down.

"The Abyss will eat me," Tang Lu said.

"Not yet," An Hong said.

If only Shang Qinghua could gift Mobei-Jun something no one else in the world could.

He's the author of this world; if only he could write something into existence! But it probably wouldn't be good even if he did.

An Yue's cloak hangs on the wall of Shang Qinghua's private workroom. There's not enough of the original material left to repair it, and the idea of permanently altering something his king's mother left him—of ruining it even more—terrifies him. He can't undo it if he fucks it up. And the more he thinks about it, the worse an idea it seems. It's not like mending and washing are impressive skills! He's a workhorse, not an artist. Even Mobei-Jun mocked him for being an An Ding disciple when they first met.

Now he's thinking about their aborted argument. Mobei-Jun never apologizes, but there was fresh fruit with Shang Qinghua's breakfast this morning, and an extra blanket laid over him when he woke up. Presumably the fight is now over, which would be fine if Shang Qinghua wasn't still nursing a coal of humiliation in his breast.

With a sigh, Shang Qinghua turns his attention to another matter involving clothes, and heads to the palace tailor for a fitting.

His current wardrobe is woefully lacking. Shang Qinghua usually favors function over form, but for the festival he wants to look the part. Maybe that'll help him feel more like a consort in charge and less like

a failure.

(Besides, he can't afford to offend the palace tailor. Clothes-making is a prized skill among demons, so she'd be hard to replace.)

The tailor fusses over him, measuring every millimeter of his body with a knotted cord and holding up near-identical bolts of fabric as she tries to decide on a shade of blue. Shang Qinghua's already ceded all hope of having control, so he allows it, daydreaming as she pins and drapes silk over him.

He's thinking wistfully of Mobei-Jun's barely perceptible smiles when the demon himself barges in.

"Shang Qinghua," Mobei-Jun booms. He's covered in black blood.

The tailor shrieks, "My silks!" and then sees the look on the king's face and makes herself scarce.

Shang Qinghua unpins the fabric and shrugs it off. He clicks his tongue as he guides Mobei-Jun to a corner of the room where a single chair sits.

"You couldn't have gone for a bath first?" Shang Qinghua scolds as he dabs at Mobei-Jun's neck with a handkerchief.

"Mm." Mobei-Jun lifts his arm. Shang Qinghua frowns; the vambrace is cracked, and there's blood inside—red blood. Mobei-Jun's blood.

"You're hurt?"

Mobei-Jun shrugs. "It won't stop bleeding."

"What!?" Shang Qinghua unties the vambrace and tosses it aside. The scratch in Mobei-Jun's forearm isn't long, but it's deep enough that blood oozes steadily

from it. A wound this size should have healed by now. Trust his king to run into some coagulopathic poison and run to Shang Qinghua instead of a healer!

Even if it is nice to be wanted!

"Hold still," he says.

He takes out his sewing kit—no need to piss off the seamstress by besmirching *her* tools. He chooses black thread; no good putting in stitches if he can't find them to take out later. Lighting a palm torch, he sterilizes the needle and waits impatiently for it to cool—heat on an ice demon's wound will only make things worse.

"What are you doing?"

"That's right, you've never had this done, have you?" It makes sense. Mobei-Jun heals so quickly that sutures aren't worth the effort. Ice demons tend to just freeze their wounds shut, anyway. He suspects Mobei-Jun didn't bother only because he wanted Shang Qinghua to fuss over him. "I can close the wound for now, but you should still go to the healer for an antidote. No, don't pout! That's an order! From—From your husband!"

Mobei-Jun's mouth curves up into a tiny, private smile.

"If it's my husband's order," he says, "then this king will obey."

He doesn't flinch as Shang Qinghua takes his first bite with the needle. Injuries on An Ding are common, so Shang Qinghua has had plenty of practice; otherwise, with his king's eyes fixed so intently on him, he's certain his hands would shake. As it is, he still fumbles a bit while tying off the last suture.

"Here. Cut." Mobei-Jun obediently uses

his claws to trim the ends. Shang Qinghua wipes his forehead and sighs. "Well, it's done. Now go away before the seamstress revolts and I have to show up to the Festival naked."

"You should."

Shang Qinghua pecks him on the cheek, aware that he's rewarding bad behavior and helpless to resist.

"Go," he repeats.

Mobei-Jun ignores him and holds up his arm for closer inspection. "You should have done it in gold," he says.

"You're not supposed to be showing it off!"

"Mm."

"It's just some stitches," Shang Qinghua mutters. "Anyone could do it."

Mobei-Jun shakes his head. "Qinghua's hands are clever," he says. He traces the stitches with a fingertip, and Shang Qinghua bats his hand away, lest he slice them open with his claws.

"You...really think so?"

Mobei-Jun nods.

Gold thread would be wasted on Mobei-Jun's arm...but it might look all right against the pure white of An Yue's cloak.

The tailor has some. When she's not looking, Shang Qinghua pockets a few bobbins.

An Hong's state was such that her own brother did not recognize her. He was repulsed by her mutilated hand, where An Hong had gnawed off her own fingers to appease a sage. He was disgusted by her feet, caked in blood and filth from her endless trek through the Abyss. And he was revolted by her words, for she did not bow or scrape or beg before him, the scion of a proud and powerful line.

For Tang Lu's sake An Hong had long abandoned pride. Yet her determination had not faltered; of her brother, the blacksmith's only apprentice, she did not hesitate to make her demand.

"I want a sword that can close the Rifts," said An Hong, and such was her courage that she was not even shaken by her brother's scornful laugh.

The morning of the festival dawns cold and clear.

Mobei-Jun was gone before sunrise, and the lonely morning did nothing to ease Shang Qinghua's nerves. The festival began in the receiving room, where the brides bragged about their gifts and speculated about which hunter would bring back the most game. Meanwhile, Shang Qinghua sat on his padded throne and tried to look appropriately regal.

Now Shang Qinghua walks towards the entrance hall in his brand new robes—dark blue with gold embellishment—acutely aware of the crowd of brides behind him. Usually he leads the way a servant leads, walking backwards and bowing. Today he strides without looking over his shoulder, determined to steal some of his husband's boundless arrogance.

The front doors have been thrown open.

Shang Qinghua stands on the threshold, careful to keep his feet off the snow. Between the palace gates he can see the returning party, Mobei-Jun in the lead, so handsome Shang Qinghua feels insane just looking at him. He's dressed in black, but for the purloined ribbon braided into his hair. The corpse of a Man-Eating Moose is slung over his shoulder; its antlers drag on the ground.

Whispers spring up behind him. Shang Qinghua smirks; Mobei-Jun's moose is the biggest.

"My king," he says, resisting the urge to bow as Mobei-Jun comes to a stop a few steps away. The hunters aren't allowed over the threshold until Mobei-Jun convinces Shang Qinghua to let him in. Shang Qinghua's role is to withhold permission, and Mobei-Jun's is to make him give it. Mobei-Jun can't touch him as long as he stays inside.

"Wife," Mobei-Jun replies. The moose corpse thuds down onto the snow between them, splashing scarlet blood across the ground. A few drops spatter over the hem of Shang Qinghua's robes. Mobei-Jun gestures at his prize. "In your honor."

"Oh," Shang Qinghua says, hand over his mouth. "Is that all...?"

The crowd behind bursts out laughing on cue. Mobei-Jun scowls, stepping forward. His fists open and close. The ribbon in his hair—An Ding teal—doesn't match his outfit. It looks terrible. Shang Qinghua's heart feels overfull looking at it; he has the urge to hurl himself over the threshold and surrender at once.

That's no fun, though.

"You couldn't find a bigger one..." He frowns. "Or something fattier, even? It looks awfully skinny."

The moose is plump, its fur glossy—a well-fed and healthy specimen. Judging by the sheer volume of blood, it must have put up a fight.

Mobei-Jun's eyes narrow. "You don't like it?"

"Well...it's all right," Shang Qinghua says, looking down like he's embarrassed on Mobei-Jun's behalf. His heart is pounding. "Maybe you ought to have hunted for longer?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"My king, if you show up with commonplace prey like this"—Shang Qinghua prods at the moose with his foot—"you can hardly expect me to let you into the palace! What will people say?"

"Qinghua," Mobei-Jun says, "come here."

"No."

"You dare."

"Go hunt me something worth eating first."

The temperature drops precipitously, and then fat snowflakes start falling from the sky.

"It's snowing," Mobei-Jun says.

"You are an *ice* demon," Shang Qinghua says, laughing. Ah, Mobei-Jun is ridiculous sometimes. It's for the best. If he didn't have so many glaring personality flaws, Shang Qinghua couldn't bear to love him.

"Qinghua."

"Yes, my king?"

"Come here."

"No, absolutely not—" The brides behind him are cheering, while the hunters gathered behind Mobei-Jun are riled up, calling out to their partners to make Shang Qinghua cooperate. Shang Qinghua grins, pleased despite himself at having managed to inspire the right response, and without having to make himself pathetic in public!

Naturally, as soon as the thought crosses his mind, one of the brides turns traitor and shoves him over the threshold.

Mobei-Jun pounces. Shang Qinghua shrieks as he's hauled off his feet. Snow settles on both their heads as Mobei-Jun bites affectionately at his neck and jaw, nuzzling against Shang Qinghua's skin while he wails for mercy.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"This Mobei-Jun has caught better prey," Mobei-Jun says. "Is my husband pleased?"

"I didn't mean for you to eat me!"

He feels the huff of silent laughter against his throat. Shang Qinghua continues to complain, wriggling ineffectively. Everyone is staring at them, but for once, Shang Qinghua doesn't mind at all.

"Let me in."

Shang Qinghua shivers as Mobei-Jun's claws dig in.

"Put me down first."

"No."

Despite himself, Shang Qinghua smiles. He feels light as a feather, all his worries dissolved. For Mobei-Jun to make a fool of himself over Shang Qinghua like this...his king must really love him.

Even if his gift is terrible, it'll be fine.

"All right, my king," he says. Hunters and brides alike cheer. "This husband will let you in."

For ten days and ten nights An Hong's brother labored over the sword.

First he demanded Tang Lu's hair, and An Hong shaved it.

Second he demanded Tang Lu's blood, and An Hong took a knife to her thigh and drained as much as she dared.



Third he demanded Tang Lu's arms and legs, and An Hong, at Tang Lu's urging, butchered her like she were game.

An Hong's brother asked for Tang Lu's eyes, and after kissing her eyelids An Hong plucked them out. He wanted her ears and tongue, and so they exchanged their final words before An Hong took those, too.

In the end, An Hong's brother forged the sword from Tang Lu's bones and skin, from her brain and heart. No part of her was left for the funeral. The newly born blade was washed with An Hong's tears.

"Where do you go now, sister?" asked the blacksmith.

"Now," An Hong said, "I keep my promise."

And she drew her sword, and shook the world.

After the hunt, the hunters are required to wash. Mobei-Jun half-listens to the conversation around him; the brides are in an adjoining chamber, and he can hear Shang Qinghua boasting about him. About his power, his skill, his sexual prowess—

Mobei-Jun feels his ears purple and forces them to hold still. He's not surprised that Shang Qinghua enjoys his attentions. Since they were teens, Mobei-Jun has been subject to his blatant ogling. But it's still pleasing to hear him say it when Mobei-Jun isn't present.

A servant lays out fresh robes for him. Mobei-Jun reties the ribbon he plucked from Shang Qinghua's hair into his own, and then—satisfied there's no blood under his claws for Shang Qinghua to whine

about—he leads his guests back into the throne room.

It's been redecorated for the festival. Mobei-Jun has never seen it so welcoming: there are low tables and mats laid out for butchering, piles of cushions, night pearls strung overhead that cast a warm gold light. The miniature brazier Mobei-Jun demanded is by Shang Qinghua's seat on the dais, already smoking.

And there, between their seats, is Shang Qinghua's gift to him: a bundle wrapped in black fabric, the ends knotted together.

Everything Mobei-Jun has Shang Qinghua has given him, in one way or another. But this is different. It's a lovers' gift; Shang Qinghua cannot couch it as what a servant owes his master.

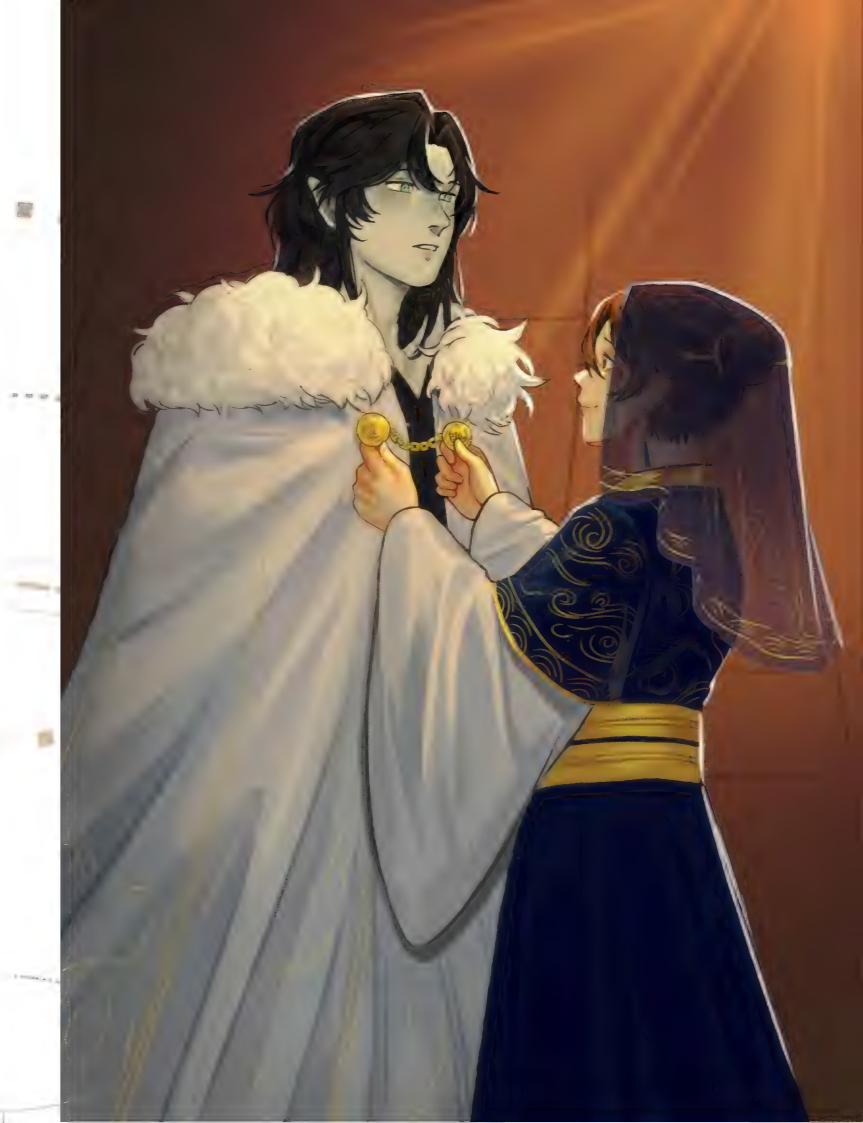
On the opposite side of the room, the doors open. Shang Qinghua enters. He's looking at his gift, and Mobei-Jun watches him swallow nervously before he meets Mobei-Jun's eyes.

The mark painted on Shang Qinghua's forehead matches his own. A gauzy veil has been pinned to his hair. He's pink-cheeked and dripping in finery. He looks every inch the spoilt consort, and Mobei-Jun revels in it. No one will ever say that Shang Qinghua wasn't afforded every honor, that Mobei-Jun didn't keep him like the rightful queen.

They meet at the dais. A hush falls over the room.

Shang Qinghua bows and then picks up his present. He offers it to Mobei-Jun with trembling fingers.

"My king, in honor of our marriage"—Shang Qinghua stumbles over the ceremonial words—"this consort would like to present you with a gift."



It's just as well that the knot falls apart as soon as Mobei-Jun tugs at a single corner. He doesn't think he would have had the patience to keep from tearing into it like a child.

Nestled in black velvet is gleaming white silk.

Once, when Mobei-Jun was small and the loss of his mother was a wound that still bled, he snuck into the vault where her belongings were kept. He buried himself in her clothes and pretended she was still there to wear them. He pressed his face into the fur of the ceremonial cloak and then shoved it away; it held none of her scent, made as it was for him.

Later he was told the cloak was ruined. By then he was hardened enough that the loss barely stung.

This cloak is no longer ruined.

This cloak has a ruff of white fur like a cloud. The silk is two different shades of white, the old and the new stitched together by lines of gold thread the way Shang Qinghua sewed up Mobei-Jun's wound. The old clasp has been replaced by a new one, decorated with what Mobei-Jun recognizes as the seal set into the top of the box the cloak once lived in. The scent of Shang Qinghua's skin lingers on it.

"Well?"

Shang Qinghua stares blankly at him. Then he takes the cloak and drapes it over Mobei-Jun's shoulders. He has to strain—he's too short to reach—and Mobei-Jun lets him, even when Shang Qinghua kicks him in the shin in retaliation.

"Brat," Shang Qinghua mumbles as he fastens the clasp. "Ah, my king, you look so handsome! Like your mother."

Mobei-Jun's heart feels like it might claw open his ribs and crawl into Shang Qinghua's mouth.

"You fixed it."

"I can't change the past," Shang Qinghua says. "But I thought, even if it's not exactly the same, it's still your mother's cloak, right?"

He cowers a little. Mobei-Jun hates to see it.

"I didn't ruin it, right?"

There are no words for what Mobei-Jun is feeling. He takes Shang Qinghua's hand instead, holding it as if it were glass, and Shang Qinghua seems to understand.

The rest of the gift-giving passes in a blur; Mobei-Jun lets Shang Qinghua do the talking. The game is dragged in for butchering. Mobei-Jun carves Shang Qinghua a few slices, as thin as paper, which he salts and cooks while Shang Qinghua prepares Mobei-Jun's favorites: the eyes and the brain. Around them the revelry is everything Mobei-Jun hoped for. Servants have dragged in long tables that overflow with food. A pair of courtiers play carved flutes of ice. The guests are eating and drinking, exclaiming over their gifts, praising Shang Qinghua's arrangements.

Shang Qinghua hums happily as he eats his fill. "You never told me how it ends," he says.

Traditionally there is a recitation of The Lament after the feast. But Mobei-Jun does not recite for strangers. Let one of the clan elders do it, he thinks.

"Come."

Mobei-Jun tugs at Shang Qinghua's wrist. Shadows curl up around them, and they reappear at the statue of An Yue's feet. The room has been decorated lavishly, too, in preparation for the recitation. But for now it's empty and silent, for him and Shang Qinghua alone.

He draws Shang Qinghua into his arms, and Shang Qinghua allows it. His eyes are closed. His head tips back, trusting. Mobei-Jun stares at his exposed throat and marvels again at his good fortune.

He's long known he has a capable spouse. Now the whole world knows it, too.

The last lines of the Lament Mobei-Jun whispers against Shang Qinghua's skin.

"Not bad," Shang Qinghua murmurs. "And now we have to listen to the whole thing again?"

"No."

"No?"

"Let this king express his appreciation," Mobei-Jun says. He lays Shang Qinghua out on the floor.

"Go on, then." Shang Qinghua grabs a fistful of Mobei-Jun's robes and pulls him down for a kiss. "Appreciate me."

On that day the Abyss was sealed.

From that day forward there were no blood sacrifices, no lamenting, no holes in the world. The Realm of Demons was made anew, and conquered from corner to corner.

As for the sword, An Hong's brother pulled it from her breast, and in the Abyss it remains. Go down to the bottom of the pit, where the world is thin, and you may see the restless dead walking. But you will not see An Hong, for having fulfilled her promise to her beloved Tang Lu, she had no reason to go on living. They say the two of them were reborn elsewhere, to walk side by side in another life, and to this day with one another they remain.



THE OUTCAST PRINCE

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mòběi-jūn/Shàng Qīnghuá

Characters

Mòběi-jūn, Shàng Qīnghuá, Mòběi-jūn Senior, Linguāng-jūn, a handful of OCs

Tags

Romance, mild blood and violence, identity reveal, brief background difficult labor, slow burn, happy ending

Summary

"The Mobei-Jun rises from his throne, eyes glowing white as his voice takes on the timbre of power unique to the reigning Ice Demon King of the Northern Desert. "Prince Mo Bei is declared outcast. You are sentenced to conditional exile according to the traditions of this Court. Prince Mo Bei, you are forbidden from returning to your ancestral lands until you have learned to count to five.

Learn to count to claim your rightful throne."

Once upon a time, an arrogant prince was exiled from his kingdom. A kind stranger takes him in. Together they write a new story.

Author:

CALAMITY BUTTERFLY

Illustrated by:

Minzbollchen

"God created man because God loves stories."

– Elie Wiesel

<u>Hunger</u>

Prince Mo Bei pants, his eyes wild. Blood drips from the dagger clutched in his hand, steam rising from the body bleeding out against the frozen ground.

"There's no coming back from this one, Nephew," Linguang-Jun chuckles, stepping out from behind a tree. "Even your father's indulgence won't be enough to sweep this under the rug."

Mo Bei drops the knife as his eyes flit across the prone body of the Southern Demon's diplomat, the favored advisor and fiancé of the Southern King's second son. Her face is finally recognizable, as the last wisps of illusion dissipate from her skin.

"But she... That was not..." he starts, but he knows there is no excuse he can make. The illusions cannot be traced back to any caster—and the only witness is his uncle, who has been plotting against him for years.

"Such a pity, your father will need to either punish you or risk war with the Southern tribes—which we cannot afford, as you well know," Linguang-Jun's voice is saccharine, dripping with false concern. "Shall I restrain you myself, or would you rather I call for the guards and let them drag you back to the castle? You are surrounded, there is no escape."

Mo Bei scowls and holds his head up. He will not compromise his dignity further; his uncle has successfully outwitted him. He spares a thought for the woman he killed—clever, vicious, and efficient at her job. He understands the precarious nature of the already strained relations with their

Southern neighbors—none of this will smooth over easily. His uncle could not have chosen a more effective strike against him. He offers his wrists silently to Linguang-Jun in defeat.

"This is a sticky situation, a terrible tragedy, and one we cannot afford to leave without redress," Linguang-Jun's voice is honeyed with poison as he shakes his head in mock concern. "Execution would be the most sensible course of action, Your Majesty."

Prince Mo Bei stands proud and silent before the court. He will not plead for his life, nor will he allow anyone to see his dignity falter.

"We will not execute the Crown Prince," the Mobei-Jun says flatly, glaring at his younger brother. "This King is perfectly aware of your tricks and your desire for power, Brother, though you are correct in that we cannot leave this unaddressed."

The Mobei-Jun rises from his throne, eyes glowing white as his voice takes on the timbre of power unique to the reigning Ice Demon King of the Northern Desert. "Prince Mo Bei is declared outcast. You are sentenced to conditional exile according to the traditions of this Court. Prince Mo Bei, you are forbidden from returning to your ancestral lands until you have learned to count to five. Learn to count to claim your rightful throne."

Flurries of ice and black qi surround Prince Mo Bei as he feels his demonic cultivation seal shut. He drops heavily to his knees, head bowed and silent as the magical bonds of his exile settle heavily into his meridians. The Outcast Prince

The Outcast Prince

"You have until dawn to leave this kingdom. After that, no roof will shelter you, and no consequence will befall any who lift up sword or hand against you. Go now, time draws short," The Mobei-Jun intones as guards remove his bindings. Prince Mo Bei stumbles out of the throne room and takes off running.

Cold

With only the clothes on his back, Mo Bei stumbles through the sparse forest. Cold and hungry, he has been trudging through unfamiliar wastelands for weeks, eating what he can forage and resting on the ground when he drops from exhaustion. For the first time in his memory, he is cold, and the cold is uncomfortable. The wind drags chilly claws through the tears in his clothes, sneaking under his tattered cloak.

Cold has always been a friend and a comfort; some of his earliest memories are the gentle caress of icy fingers on his face, held by chilly arms as his mother rocked him and sang (quietly, so his father and uncle wouldn't hear). He remembers her cold hands shaping fragile baubles of ice for him as he silently grinned in delight, destroying the faceted and filigreed sculptures with small hands and sharp teeth. But quietly, always quietly. His mother taught him well to stay unnoticed, to keep his thoughts to himself, to wield silence as both a shield and weapon. But his silence never protected him from his uncle's hunger.

His mother has been gone for many years, the victim of a "tragic accident" that everyone knows (but no one can prove) was caused by his uncle. The same accident nearly killed Mo Bei as a child, as he and his mother stumbled into a group of wandering human cultivators on a stretch of road Mo Bei doesn't remember having

chosen to walk. His mother died protecting him; a teenage human boy had tricked the cultivators into ignoring Mo Bei and had spent a week carrying an injured Mo Bei back to the borderlands between the human and demon realms. Mo Bei's memories of the event are hazy, but he remembers the unfamiliar warmth of the boy's arms as he was carried, the flash of a yellow ribbon in the boy's hair.

"You are almost to safety, my king," the boy had said.

Mo Bei had scoffed at the human's ignorance. "I'm not the king."

"You will be," the boy had said, smiling, then handed him to the demon guards at the gates between the realms and vanished. The boy never told Mo Bei his name, and Mo Bei never saw him again.

Mo Bei rubs his thumb across the tattered bit of silk ribbon that never leaves his



pocket, bright color long faded to a muddy tan, though the swirling patterns of strange sigils are still distinct.

The cold bites deep into the slivers of skin Mo Bei's clothes don't cover-his face, his wrists, the back of his neck. Mo Bei knows he alone is to blame for his current predicament-he had arrogantly believed himself strong enough to deal with or ignore the threat of his uncle's hunger for power, assuming his position as heir to the throne would protect him, and that his father would keep his uncle's hunger in check. He knows that he let himself be manipulated into killing the diplomat, let his guard down and let himself be outsmarted. Recognizing his own naivete after the fact is cold comfort, cold like his fingers and toes, now stiff and swollen. He pulls his frayed cloak more tightly around his shoulders and keeps walking.

Even without the benefit of his cultivation, he can hardly miss the distant howls of ice wolves as the sun begins to set. Mo Bei scans his surroundings looking for shelter or advantages and sees very few; the trees in this stretch of frozen forest are all thin saplings, recent growth after a massive forest fire took out the old forests of this region a few scant years ago. The forest is healing, but none of the trees would support Mo Bei's weight should he try to climb to escape the wolf pack. He finds a low boulder and climbs that instead, to try and give himself some slight advantage over the pack that he knows he can't outrun.

Mo Bei flexes his claws and drops into a relaxed fighting stance. He can't access his magic around the block on his qi, so claws and speed and cleverness will have to be good enough.

He knows the first wolf to approach will be the lowest ranked in their pack hierarchy, so dispatching it quickly might be enough to convince the pack he is too much of a threat to bother with. Unfortunately, winter had come early and hard, and it is obvious from the looks of the first skinny wolf that the pack is hungry. This is not a threat to chase off an interloper; this pack is hunting for needed food, and with his qi suppressed, Mo Bei doesn't project enough of a predator's aura to feel like a threat to the pack.

The first attack is sloppy; the low ranking wolf is obviously not much of a fighter and is quickly dispatched. The next several attacks are not, and it takes all of Mo Bei's concentration to keep the wolves off. The fight is exhausting and bloody, and lasts much longer than Mo Bei is accustomed to such things lasting. The last wolves run off, finally acknowledging him as a bigger threat than their pack can take down. But the fight leaves Mo Bei weak from blood loss as his adrenaline runs out, already hungry and tired from his weeks-long flight. He tucks himself into an uncomfortable but defensible indentation in the boulder as he finally succumbs to unconsciousness.

When Mo Bei next awakens, he is warm and dry. His wounds are bandaged and he is lying on a pallet near a cheerfully crackling hearth. He has a vague memory of a dream—of being a small child chasing a yellow ribbon, a thin throat gripped in his claws, and a soothing voice promising safety. He slits his eyes open and keeps his body still and soft, not giving up the advantage of the illusion of sleep. He is in the main room of a small, cluttered cottage. Unfamiliar amulets hang on the walls and dangle from the ceiling, knotted red ribbons wrap

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around ceiling beams and the legs of the sparse furniture scattered haphazardly in the space. Even with his qi suppressed, Mo Bei can feel the buzz of strong protection charms set into the walls themselves. He hears someone humming as they bustle about, the smell of food heavy in the air making his stomach rumble.

"Oh good, you're awake," a voice from behind him says. "Let me help you up, the wounds on your side will make getting up a bit hard."

"Who are you," Mo Bei growls as he scrambles to his feet, clumsy from pain but with the speed of a cornered animal.

"Easy, my king, easy. Let's not tear those stitches open after I worked so hard to sew you back together," a human man says, hands open and placating. The man is much smaller than Mo Bei, though probably average sized for a human-his eyes and hair dark, his face unremarkable. There are finger and claw-shaped wounds on the man's throat that Mo Bei is fairly certain are his fault. Mo Bei hasn't spent enough time around humans to be able to read much into his clothes nor demeanor, though something about the man seems to put Mo Bei at ease. He doesn't trust the feeling, not when he is surrounded by such strong, unfamiliar magic. Mo Bei growls and flexes his claws.

"I am Shang Qinghua, and you are in my home. You are safe here, and you can leave at any time, you are not a prisoner," the man says. "Here, I have a bowl of soup for you."

Mo Bei edges towards the door, not turning his back on the strange man. He walks out of the house into the driving wind. It had begun snowing again while Mo Bei was unconscious, and the ground was already crunching underfoot with ice. The cold digs right into Mo Bei's fresh injuries, and he stumbles hard, one of his legs refusing to support his weight. The human watches him from the open door.

"See? You are free to come and go as you please. But would you like to come back inside? The wind is picking up, and the temperature will be dropping again once the sun sets. The soup is warm and fresh, and there's more than I can finish by myself," the man says, holding the door open.

Mo Bei growls at the man, but stumbles his way back inside.

"Why did you call me king? This one is no king," Mo Bei says, scowling.

The man laughs nervously and says, "You just seem very regal, and I had to call you something while you were unconscious. Is there some other name you would rather I call you?"

Mo Bei doesn't answer.

"W... would you like some soup?" the man asks tentatively, offering the bowl again.

"How do I know it isn't poisoned?" Mo Bei asks.

Shang Qinghua takes a sip from the bowl. "See? Not poisoned." He places the bowl down on the table and fetches another, placing both side by side. He sits and waits.

Mo Bei considers snarling that this commoner is not worthy to join him for a meal, but even he recognizes he is in a stranger's home, benefiting from a stranger's mercy. His stomach growls again and he decides that food seems like a better option than dignity. He joins the man at the table.

After weeks of foraging, the feeling of hot food in his belly is nearly dizzying. After weeks of being outside, the numbing cold seeping into his bones, being in a warm dry house is nearly euphoric. Mo Bei sleeps for two entire days—warm, safe, and fed.

Kindness

It is still snowing when Mo Bei next awakens. There is warm food and fresh clothing waiting for him.

"The clothing may not fit very well; I'm not much of a tailor, but everything is clean and in decent shape," Shang Qinghua says, in lieu of any other greeting. Mo Bei grunts to acknowledge he hears the man, and tucks into his breakfast.

"Winter around here tends to hit hard and linger for months. I don't know what your plans are, but if you need a place to stay for a while, I could use the help," Shang Qinghua says, preparing ink and brushes at a low desk.

"What kind of help, human?" Mo Bei asks, looking suspicious.

"I am a...well, I suppose you could say I am a consultant. I am a cultivator and a seer, a storyteller and story collector, a bit of a jack of all trades. I help folks who come seeking aid—whether it be settling unquiet spirits, giving general advice, or brewing medicines or potions. The work is generally thankless and relentless and not well-compensated, and it doesn't always leave me much time to take care of my home. I would be grateful for an extra set of hands," Shang Qinghua says, rubbing the back of his neck and leaving streaks of ink.

"Why should I not just kill you and take your things?" Mo Bei asks, more petulant than threatening.

Mo Bei thinks he hears the man mutter, I

don't remember writing him this bratty—but louder, Shang Qinghua says, "And miss out on the benefit of my sparkling company?"

Mo Bei rolls his eyes, at both the man's eccentricity and his awful humor, but thinks about his options. Staying here seems like the best option he has found so far, and having food and shelter squared away should allow him to make some progress on untangling the riddle of his exile.

"Why would you help a strange demon?" Mo Bei asks.

Shang Qinghua is silent for a long moment. "I suppose," he begins hesitantly, "everyone, regardless of species, who has the capacity to feel miserable deserves the chance to feel less miserable. If you kill me, you kill me, but at least we're both warm and fed until that happens, right?"

"How is the misery of others your problem?" Mo Bei asks, honestly baffled.

Shang Qinghua shrugs and takes a bite of his own food, avoiding eye contact. Mo Bei evaluates his host. The man is a study in contrasts—alternating nervous and confident, deferential and snarky, with seemingly little sense of self preservation. Mo Bei expects the man to eventually ask him for increasingly large favors or attempt to bribe or extort him.

"Tell me more about what duties you would have me do," Mo Bei finally says.

The blizzard keeps the two men indoors for over a week, as Mo Bei acclimates to his new arrangement. Much to his snarling ruffled dignity, he needs to be taught how to do even the most basic tasks like house cleaning and mending. Growing up royalty, he had never folded laundry nor washed his own dishes before. Between his exhaustion from the extended rough living and his suppressed qi, his body takes longer to heal than usual, making chores more difficult. Shang Qinghua is unflaggingly patient with him, giving him face by pretending each task is a Brand New Thing that No One Has Ever Quite Done Properly Before, but the weakness and menial labor grates on Mo Bei's self esteem.

Days turn to weeks as the winter continues to dump snow on the little cottage. Life with Shang Qinghua is quiet and relatively restful. Mo Bei still doesn't trust the odd, twitchy human, and he continues to swing between growling hostility and polite but resentful gratitude.

A few weeks into Mo Bei's stay, a frantic knock at the door interrupts their dinner preparations. A series of talismans flash red over the door frame as Shang Qinghua hurries to answer, wiping his hands on his robes and tucking a plain uninked brush into his hair.

"It's my wife, the midwife says the baby is turned—please hurry, we don't have much time," the man at the door says in a rush, wringing his hands and tracking snow into the house. Mo Bei scowls at the disrespect—the man hadn't even asked a proper question, and simply pushed his way into Shang Qinghua's home with shouted demands. But Shang Qinghua seems to take all the chaos in stride, soothing the man with reassuring words as he grabs his cloak from the peg by the door.

"Will you wait here, or would you rather come with me?" Shang Qinghua asks with a private smile directed at Mo Bei. "I know the family; we could use another adult if you're willing."

"Won't they be alarmed to see a demon in their home?" Mo Bei asks with a disdainful twist of his mouth.

Shang Qinghua just chuckles. "Come along, I may be awhile, and I don't want to think about what mischief you'll get up to in my mending pile if I leave you alone for that long."

Mo Bei bristles, but grabs his meticulouslymended cloak and heads out into the snow.

The man's home is small and humble, in a similar style to Shang Qinghua's. Mo Bei recognizes the amulet hanging by the front door as he stamps snow from his boots, the palpable buzz of magic as familiar as the sigils themselves. Shang Qingua presses a kiss to his fingers and brushes the amulet as he enters the house.

"This looks like the ones in your house, are they common to the region?" Mo Bei asks curiously, fingering the frayed ribbon in his pocket.

"It should look like the ones from my house, I made them," Shang Qinghua says as he's dragged into a bedroom, the door slamming behind him.

Mo Bei looks around the cluttered living space. He counts six children of various ages reading books and playing with toys around the hearth. Looking more closely, the children all have a mix of human and demonic features, with the short horns and wide green eyes common to the Southern Stag Beetle tribes.

The smallest of them runs over to him and tangles a small blue skinned hand in the bottom of his tunic. Mo Bei stares down at her, at a loss. He hasn't spent much time around children and isn't sure what to do.

"You are very tall and very big," she declares crossly, with all the authority of a very small child. "You will be my best friend now. This is Dolly, and you will be Dolly's best friend too."

Not quite knowing how he got there, Mo Bei finds himself in the middle of the pile of children. He allows the children to cheerfully bully him into various nonsensical games. Shang Qinghua comes back out a while later to find Mo Bei surrounded by children, with ribbons and bits of silk flowers braided into his hair, having what appears to be a very fierce battle between himself and several chipped teacups. The teacups are winning.

"What is happening?" Mo Bei asks as Shang Qinghua starts rummaging through drawers. Two of the children climb off Mo Bei to wrap around Shang Qinghua's legs, making cheerful quacking noises.

"Not right now, Shayna and Tsadia. I need to grab paper for your mami," Shang Qinghua says, gently pushing the children off of him. One of the older children silently hands Shang Qinghua a stack of blank paper, only slightly crumpled.

"Oh, thank you Rayzel, that's exactly what I needed. Their mother is in labor and the baby is breached, I'm just gonna help a little," Shang Qinghua says distractedly, pulling the calligraphy brush from his hair. Pushing aside the clutter of toys and crumb-filled plates from a low table near the fireplace, he kneels down and carefully licks the end of the brush.

"The baby was breached, but Hinda, the midwife, was clever. Everyone was grateful for her years of experience as she swiftly repositioned the baby. The rest of Chasya's labor and delivery was smooth and easy, and the new baby was born strong and healthy—a beloved and welcomed addition

to their family," Shang Qinghua murmurs out loud as his empty brush traces characters across the blank page. As Mo Bei watches, golden light begins to glow from the brush as characters appear on the paper. The script is gorgeous, despite the wrinkled paper and Shang Qinghua's terrible posture.

As soon as the last character appears on the page, Shang Qinghua springs up and runs back to the bedroom, slapping the paper to the door with a whispered prayer. The paper sticks where it is placed, the characters on the page flaring with the same golden light before they disappeared entirely. The nowempty page floats to the ground, and Shang Qinghua breathes a deep sigh and slides down the wall along with it.

A short while later, there is the distinctive wail of a healthy newborn.

Mo Bei stares at Shang Qinghua while the children cuddle close around them both. "What did you do? I have never seen magic quite like that before," he says with a frown.

"Eh, I just tipped the balance in their favor. An uncertain story can end well if given a gentle nudge in a believable direction. The breach wasn't that bad, as these things go. And Hinda is a very clever and experienced midwife, she's the true hero of the story," Shang Qinghua says, shrugging and avoiding eye contact. "Anyway, we should head out, the family will want some private time to rest and settle."

Mo Bei stares at Shang Qinghua for a bit longer, but no more information is forthcoming. He begins untangling flowers from his hair, promising the children he would return to play with them another day. Many hugs later, they finally leave the family's home.

The Outcast Prince

The Outcast Prince

Gratitude

Winter stretches towards spring, and Mo Bei finds himself settling into comfortable routines. The daily chores and errands no longer feel humiliating, and he finds himself enjoying the simplicity of defined tasks with definite endpoints and every likelihood of satisfactory completion. Shang Qinghua is an easy person to share space with, pulling Mo Bei out of his foul moods with stories and busywork, flattery and teasing. For the first time in his life, Mo Bei wakes feeling content and calm, falls asleep tired and satisfied with the accomplishments of the day.

Mo Bei finds himself unexpectedly enjoying supporting Shang Qinghua as the man helps the seekers who show up at his door. As the crown prince, Mo Bei has sat in on countless court sessions as his father or court ministers handle supplications from both diplomats and the folks living under their rule seeking aid or legal rulings. But the simplicity of folks showing up at Shang Qinghua's door, and the kindness that Shang Qinghua shows each, listening carefully to every request and helping as he is able—is a very different experience.

Mo Bei pays careful attention to Shang Qinghua as he listens to the requests of his seekers. He notes everything from body language to the types of questions Shang Qinghua asks, and peppers Shang Qinghua after their frequent visitors leave with questions about why he handles various seekers in various ways. He figures, if he returns to his kingdom with nothing more than better listening skills and the ability to remove a variety of stains from several different types of fabric, he will feel his time has been well spent.

"Tell me, my king—where you grew up, what stories did your people tell about the beginning of the world?" Shang Qinghua asks one day while they are preparing ingredients for a healing salve one of the local apothecaries had requested. "I am a collector of tales, and I haven't heard any of yours yet."

"Our scholars have theories about stars and the collision of matter, it's not something I've studied much. But my mother told me myths and stories when I was small," Mo Bei says haltingly.

"Yes, those are the stories I'm interested in! Would you tell me the stories she told you?" Shang Qinghua asks eagerly, stirring a large pot full of murky liquid.

Mo Bei huffs a quiet laugh. "If it's bedtime stories you want, I suppose I can tell them. In the beginning there was nothing. And the Nothing was lonely, and hungry, and cold, and he didn't know himself. The Nothing took his first breath. His exhale birthed sound. Sound took shape and birthed characters. Characters shaped words. And from those words our world was created. The Nothing became Something, shaping himself with his words as he shaped our world. His first act of creation was naming himself, and the name he chose was /Airplane/. /Airplane/ used his words to shape shelter and a full belly, but he was still lonely. Not everyone liked his words, which is silly, because real things aren't always kind or pretty or fair. /Airplane/ drowned in his own words and was cast down to live in the world his words had shaped. And if I don't listen to my mother he will come and shape monsters with his words to come eat me up, so now it's time for bed." Mo Bei smiles. "Is that the kind of story you were wanting?"

Noticing his usually talkative companion had gone silent, Mo Bei glances up from the seeds he has been grinding. Shang Qinghua is pale and shaky, staring at Mo Bei with a haunted look.

"Are you okay?" Mo Bei asks.

"Fine, fine, just a little overheated," Shang Qinghua says faintly. Mo Bei hustles him into a chair and fetches a cup of water. He shakes his head. For someone as competent and practical as Shang Qinghua is, he doesn't take very good care of himself. Mo Bei grabs some food ingredients from the pantry and starts preparing lunch.

"How does your seership work?" Mo Bei asks abruptly one unremarkable day while the two are returning from market with supplies to mend a broken fence.

"Magic," Shang Qinghua laughs, fluttering his fingers around his face.

Mo Bei gives him an unimpressed glare.

"Well, it is a kind of magic. Someone comes with a question, I let the answer come through me," Shang Qinghua says, rummaging around in the storage shed for tools. Mo Bei picks up the tools he's looking for and hands them to Shang Qinghua, putting away the things Shang Qinghua knocked over in his hunt.

"If I had a question, what would I need to do to get an answer?" Mo Bei asks.

"Ohh. Oh, *that's* what you're asking," Shang Qinghua says, pausing in his work to fix Mo Bei with a piercing look. "Do you want the answer to your question, my king? Do

you need it? Or are you just feeling nosy about the answer?"

"Need," Mo Bei grits out, breathing through his flare of annoyance. He knows the irritation is not at Shang Qinghua.

"Let me get you some paper and ink. You'll need to write the question down," Shang Qinghua says, now rummaging in a different direction. He pulls out writing supplies and starts handing them to Mo Bei, snapping his fingers to light a few candles in the cluttered space.

Mo Bei freezes. The leap from "how does this work" to "we're doing this now" happened faster than he expected, and he feels off-kilter. Shang Qinghua clears space off a rickety table in the shed and runs outside to grab a stool.

"Don't you need to prepare?" Mo Bei asks.

"Nah, I'm fine. You'll see," Shang Qinghua says, shrugging.

"What is the exchange? What is the cost?" Mo Bei asks.

"You got the grass stains out of my favorite coat, my king, I think we're even," Shang Qinghua says, laughing.

"I'm serious," Mo Bei says, frowning.

"So am I," Shang Qinghua says, actually looking serious for once. "Giving answers is my penance; it's the least I can do, I... never mind. You're fine, if you're really grateful for your answer, you can cook me dinner afterwards."

"But I always cook you dinner," Mo Bei grumbles.

"What?? Lies! You always cook lunch. We split dinner responsibilities at least 50/50!" Shang Qinghua says in mock outrage. "How

The Outcast Prince

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about this: you promise not to beat me up, even if you don't like the answer."

"Qinghua," Mo Bei starts, looking aggrieved.

"I'm kidding—KIDDING—don't fret, I know you wouldn't hurt me." Shang Qinghua laughs, bumping his shoulder into Mo Bei. "Here is a fresh brush, let me know when the question is written to your satisfaction. Take as long as you need, but it's better if you keep the question simple. I can get started on the fence without you."

Shang Qinghua leaves, and Mo Bei picks up the brush contemplatively. He remembers calligraphy lessons, remembers being lectured about why calligraphy is considered the highest art. Writing is an act of creation, his tutors taught him. It mirrors the first act of creation—the creation of the world. How the words are shaped—what the writer thinks, believes, feels—all of the subjective states the writer passes through become encapsulated in the birth of fresh

marks in a previously blank space. The state of the writer shapes the experience of later observers as they interact with your work. All things are possible in that pregnant pause before the beginning, the moment when one is poised with inked brush over blank papers.

Mo Bei remembers the old stories of the writer creator god that his mother used to tell him, /Airplane/ writing life into the previously blank canvas of the world. How the tiny imperfections and mistakes are what gives the artform depth, passion, and meaning. He thinks about Shang Qinghuaterrible posture and ink on his face where he's swiped hair from his eyes, and the most beautiful calligraphy Mo Bei has ever seen, letters limned in glowing gold for a moment before settling into the pages. Mo Bei finds he suddenly misses his home, an unexpected wave of homesickness rising in his throat like flood waters as the grip of winter releases its hold on icy mountains. He wishes he could take Shang Qinghua to see the waterfalls of his homeland, the furious tumble of freshly freed water crashing down from the cliffs where he grew up.

He corrects his posture, settles his body into a meditative state, inks his brush, and begins to write.

How do I learn to count to five?

Mo Bei pops his head out of the shed, looking for Shang Qinghua, but the man is already at his side.

"All done?" he asks unnecessarily, never one to miss an opportunity to fill the space with

extraneous words. Mo Bei is so charmed by him. Mo Bei says nothing, stepping aside to allow Shang Qinghua to bustle into the cluttered shed.

"Ok, so the next step is to fold the paper up. We call this a paper airplane," Shang Qinghua says, grabbing a blank page to demonstrate.

"Like the god?" Mo Bei asks, meticulously copying Shang Qinghua's folds.

Shang Qinghua's laugh bounces through the small space. "Yes, just like him. Flighty and flimsy and easy to smush. See how the front point is a bit heavy, and the sides fan out into wings? The shape allows the paper to become something that can fly, slicing through the air and catching the wind of its own passage, similar to a bird. Follow me."

Mo Bei carries his own paper airplane carefully and follows Shang Qinghua outside and across a field to a tall, crumbling stone wall. The wall is clearly the ruins of an older structure, tangled trees and underbrush disguising what the structure's original function might have been. There are bits of paper crammed into cracks in the wall and littering the ground in various stages of decay.

"For wishes, folks can just write what they want and tuck their requests into the cracks. For those, I do the best I can, no promises. But for questions—you have to want the answer badly enough to give it wings, to launch it out into the world. So you throw the airplane towards the wall and see what it does. If it lands on the ground, then the question can't be answered this way, I'm not the right conduit. If the question sticks, then I can answer," Shang Qinghua says, tidying up the space as he talks—collecting bits of folded and crumpled paper, smoothing and stacking them and tucking them into his sleeve. "Alright, the

space is ready. Throw your airplane when you're ready."

Mo Bei looks at the airplane resting in his hand. He closes his eyes and centers his thoughts, reflecting on the journey that brought him here. While he understands the theory of how to get the small folded paper to fly, his hands feel unpracticed. He takes a breath and throws.

The airplane is light, and cuts through the air faster than Mo Bei was expecting. It sails straight towards the wall, then unexpectedly loops up and around and gets stuck in Shang Qinghua's hair. Shang Qinghua barks out a surprised laugh.

"In all my years of doing this work, I have never had that happen before," he says, untangling the paper and making a mess of his already messy bun. He unfolds the paper, smoothing its creases, fingers tracing over the careful calligraphy. As Mo Bei watches, Shang Qinghua's eyes fill with golden light, his body outlined in gold as the air turns sharp and heavy.

"To learn to count to five, you must learn your five lessons," Shang Qinghua says, voice humming with power. "Have you known hunger? Have you known cold? Have you known kindness? Have you known gratitude? Can you feel humble? When you learn to count to five, your power will return and your exile will end. Your throne awaits, rightful king."

As Shang Qinghua speaks, the words appear on the wall in glowing script, flashing brightly then suddenly contracting. A pure white jade token falls to the ground at Mo Bei's feet with a muted thud, the answer to his question carved in flowing golden calligraphy on its smooth face. He picks up the token then drops to the ground in a deep bow, forehead pressed into the damp grass.

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An anxious hand pulls on his shoulder, tugging him up. "Please don't, I don't deserve that," Shang Qinghua says, still-glowing eyes cast down.

"But you..." Mo Bei starts, but a faintly glowing hand covers his mouth.

"I'm Shang Qinghua, a seer and a storyteller and a jack of all trades, nothing more these days," Shang Qinghua says as the glow in and around him begins to fade.

Mo Bei gently moves Shang Qinghua's hand off his mouth, and presses it to his cheek before gently pulling it down. With his other hand, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a frayed, sigil-marked ribbon, pressing the bit of fabric into Shang Qinghua's hand. He closes Shang Qinghua's fingers around the ribbon, placing a reverent kiss on clever ink-stained fingers. Shang Qinghua's wide eyes dart up to stare at him, cheeks pink and mouth open.

Mo Bei releases Shang Qinghua's hand as sparkling eddies of snow swirl around him, whipping his hair around his face. With a sensation like a sheet of ice shattering, the block on Mo Bei's demonic cultivation releases, flooding icy qi back through his meridians. The small demonic clan huadian on his brow glows brightly, branching and spreading until his full royal clan sigil curves across his forehead, matching the icy blue glow of his eyes.

"My king..." Shang Qinghua breathes, but Mo Bei's hands cup his face as he silences Shang Qinghua with a kiss. Tendrils of gold twine with swirling ice as Shang Qinghua's lips part sweetly for him. Mo Bei pulls back with great reluctance, pressing their foreheads together.

"I have a throne to claim," Mo Bei says. "Wait for me, I will return for you."

"Wait for you? Mo Bei, what am I waiting for?? Mo Bei!" Shang Qinghua shouts as Mo Bei smirks and presses one last kiss to Shang Qinghua's forehead. He slips through the shadows and returns home, the sound of Shang Qinghua's shouts still ringing in his ears.

Humility

A formal session of the Court of the Northern Kingdom is in full swing as Mo Bei appears in the center of the throne room. The crowd falls silent as Mo Bei steps out of swirling shadows.

"Father," Mo Bei says, dropping gracefully down before the throne, forehead pressed to the floor.

"Arise, Son of the Northern Desert," the Mobei-Jun says.

"Sire, you can't possibly..." Linguang-Jun starts, rushing forward, but is stopped by a spear of black ice that materializes in front of him, barring his way.

"Silence," the word is absolute, the hall ringing with the magical force behind the command.

"Tell me," the Mobei-Jun says, voice directed back to Mo Bei. "Have you learned to count to five?"

"I have," Mo Bei says, his voice taking on its own resonance of power. "I know hunger. I know cold. I know kindness. I know gratitude. I know humility. I have come to claim my rightful throne."

"I will not permit this!" Linguang-Jun shouts, wrestling out from under the magical compulsion for silence. He unsheathes his sword and rushes towards Mo Bei, a confusing swirl of illusions sweeping around them both. But Mo Bei is prepared for his tricks this time. He steps into the shadows and reappears behind his uncle, slicing through the tendon of his ankle, hobbling him.

"Your Highness, what would you have me do?" Mo Bei asks, parrying a flurry of blows from an enraged Linguang-Jun.

"The throne is yours. Do what you think is best," his father says.

Linguang-Jun is a fine swordsman, but Mo Bei has been carefully studying his uncle since he was a child. His moves are predictable and easy for Mo Bei to counter, and he is awkward on his feet and weakened from blood loss. The fight is over almost as soon as it begins, Linguang-Jun disarmed and Mo Bei's sword stabbed cleanly through his chest.

"May the creator write you a kinder story next time," Mo Bei says, pulling his sword free. Linguang-Jun drops heavily to his knees, fury fading to resignation across his features.

"Your mother would have been proud of you," Linguang-Jun whispers with the last of his breath. Mo Bei lays his uncle's body down, then approaches the throne with bloody hands and bowed head.

"The king who can count to five can rule a kingdom with a strong and just hand, and a wise heart. This throne is rightfully yours," the old Mobei-Jun says as he stands. He takes his crown off and places it on Mo Bei's head. "Hail to the Mobei-Jun, may his reign be prosperous and blessed."

"Hail to the Mobei-Jun!" the throne room erupts with cheers. The new Mobei-Jun smiles, thinking about the story he will tell Shang Qinghua about all of this. A knock at the door has Shang Qinghua's amulets flashing a cheerful red. He answers the door quickly, not sure what to expect. A tall, regal ice demon stands at his door—in rich billowing robes, a heavy crown on his head, the intricate curving marks of his kingship glowing across his brow. A full royal procession stretches out behind him.

"I have come seeking counsel from the storyteller who lives here," he says, smiling.

"My king! What...what counsel do you seek?" Shang Qinghua stammers.

"If a king were to come seeking a consort, what would you suggest he do to woo his beloved?" Mobei-Jun asks, taking Shang Qinghua's hand and brushing his lips across ink-stained knuckles.

"You're doing a pretty good job already without any advice from me," Shang Qinghua snorts, red-faced and grinning. Mobei-Jun pulls him in for a kiss, knocking a calligraphy brush from his hair.

"Shang Qinghua, will you marry me?" Mobei-Jun asks between kisses.

"Yes, yes, of course, my King, yes," Shang Qinghua answers, hands cupping Mobei-Jun's face.

And they lived happily ever after.



GOLD SHOES, SOFT PAWS

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/Shang Qinghua

Characters

Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun, Linguang-Jun

Tags

Canon-Typical Violence, Misunderstandings, Ye Xian AU

Summary

Shang Qinghua shelters an injured snow leopard cub. There's no way this could backfire on him, right?

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Peach

A very, very long time ago there lived a young man beset by misfortune.

If there was a rock in Shang Qinghua's path, he would trip on it. If there were coins in his pouch, a hole would miraculously appear for the money to fall through. If he had a lover...well, he'd never had one of those, but the distinct lack of suitors naturally fell under the misfortune umbrella—ahem, you get the idea. He was as unlucky as unlucky could get!

So it stood to reason that during one of Shang Qinghua's daily excursions to collect firewood...he found a demon.

"No, no, no!" Shang Qinghua yelped as he hit the moist forest floor. His meticulously balanced collection of branches tumbled from his arms and his first worry wasn't the—frankly, pretty gruesome—bruise he could already feel forming along his hip, but of the precious time he was about to lose from gathering it all up again.

He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and squinted into the dusty orange of the setting sun before he pushed up onto his elbows to glare pitifully back at whatever had tripped him. He would give that inanimate object a piece of his mind!!

"You—" Shang Qinghua stopped his tirade before it began. There were no jagged rocks or jutting roots behind him to blame for his fall. The only thing in his path was a small furry creature curled in a loose ball, shining white fur speckled with deep black spots.

Shang Qinghua blinked.

"Oh," he said with typical teenage apathy.

"Just a snow leopard cub."

He didn't really want to yell at a-

Wait. A SNOW LEOPARD!?

Shang Qinghua jolted up and shuffled closer on his already scuffed hands and knees. How the hell did a snow leopard cub wind up in the small forest near his home? He had heard they could only be found high in the mountains where the king's palace was located.

The little guy must have been a deep sleeper to not have awoken after Shang Qinghua kinda sorta maybe *cough* kicked him. Accidentally! He didn't know there was anything there, okay! Please don't go around telling people he kicked defenseless baby animals!

The cub's side rose and fell in a steady rhythm, so the poor guy was definitely still alive. Shang Qinghua grew bold enough to give a careful poke. His finger came away slick with dark blood.

Hidden beneath the cub's beautiful fur were a couple of harsh gashes that bled sluggishly—definitely not something caused by Shang Qinghua's soft boots. He was pretty sure they were claw marks from another animal, and the wounds looked... bad.

Shang Qinghua wasn't cruel but he was pragmatic, and so two thoughts sprang to his mind in quick succession. One—I haven't eaten since yesterday. And two, accompanied by the apropos growling of his stomach—This is free dinner!!

Sure, baby animals were cute but nightfall was fast approaching and the money he could have earned from the collected wood was slipping through his fingers with every passing moment. No money, no food!

"You're dying anyway," Shang Qinghua reasoned as he scrambled in search of a sharp stone. "This is just how the world works! So please don't come back as a vengeful spirit once you're in my stomach, all right?"

He pried a rock the size of his fist from the damp earth and hefted it in his hands, testing the weight. A warm gust of wind blew by as he lifted it above the cub's prone form, rustling the animal's soft fur. The little snow leopard's whiskers twitched.

He looked sad. Lonely.

But hey, so was Shang Qinghua!

Ah, and the little guy was probably hungry like him too...

Shang Qinghua dropped the rock.

A frustrated noise—halfway between a whimper and a groan—escaped his lips. He smacked the ground with his fist.

"Why did you have to be so adorable? Tugging on my nonexistent heartstrings... Fine! I'll bring you home if I have to, but I'm not nice enough to let you stay. Once you're healed—"

Ice-blue eyes snapped open. The cub hissed. Shang Qinghua pulled his arm away just in time; those small jaws just barely missed in their attempt to clamp around his wrist.

"Aiyo, so fierce!" There was something about that cold glare coming from a creature so small that made Shang Qinghua's heart jump.

The two of them stared at each other, frozen and wary. And then the cub slumped over. Those intense blue eyes fell closed.

Shang Qinghua exhaled; the puff of air lifted a lock of dark hair that had escaped

his bun.

"It's a good thing you're cute," he said under his breath as he hesitantly gathered the cub into his arms. "Because your personality leaves a lot to be desired."

Later on, Shang Qinghua would not remember he had said such a thing. But your humble narrator thought it was apt to draw attention to the words, considering there was another demon our intrepid hero had yet to meet. One who made the little cub's personality appear downright gentle.

Linguang-Jun did not hate his nephew.

He hated his brother, he hated his brother's wife—and loved her in equal measure but that was another story—and he hated that their wretched union had given birth to little Mobei. The cub was sticky and ridiculously fond of Linguang-Jun. Chubby and endearing and fluffy. Always stumbling at his uncle's heels with paws he had yet to grow into.

So, no. Linguang-Jun did not hate his nephew.

But he sure as hell resented the brat.

Which was probably why, instead of allowing his genetically cold heart to warm while in the cub's presence, he kept it coated in ice and did what had to be done.

Or what he wanted to do.

Same difference.

Shang Qinghua toed open the door to his barren home, arms full of the most dangerous cat he'd ever held, and wondered what god of luck he had pissed off simply by being born.

The humble shack with its peeling walls and aging furniture was one of two things his late parents had left for him after their untimely passing. He counted his stubborn personality as an inheritance too, heh.

He may have been no older than three when they shuffled off to the Yellow Springs but he had gotten by just fine with those gifts. He learned by trial and error how to hunt the small rodents that scampered through the nearby woods, how to cook and clean by himself, how to patch up his own scrapes and burns. He collected firewood to sell in the village and earned a meager sum each week.

He made himself useful.

It wasn't an easy life, but at least he stayed alive long enough to grow from a beleaguered child into a sensible teenager with no illusions about the harsh reality of the world.

Besides, being self-sufficient at a young age was a desirable trait! The cub he brought back could stand to learn a thing or two.

Shang Qinghua set the little beast down on the bare pallet he called a bed, then turned to light a lamp to escape the growing dimness. He had been too shocked earlier to fully examine the injury, so he brought the lamp closer to see just what he was working with. It was oddly difficult to find the wound with so much dense fur in the way. He gingerly pressed his fingers to the cub's stomach to feel for it but—

"Eh?" Shang Qinghua felt around with dawning confusion. He knew there was an

injury there. Dried blood was still on his finger, but the skin beneath the cub's fur was completely fine. He couldn't even find a scratch.

Shang Qinghua turned the cub this way and that, holding his unconscious body up to the light. The wounds were bad! And it definitely wasn't possible for a normal creature to heal that fast...

Oh god. What the hell had he brought back with him?!

Shang Qinghua felt like crying. "Please tell me snow leopards are just fast healers and you're not a spirit or a demon."

The cub—as was common for unconscious beings—didn't respond. Shang Qinghua sighed, placed him back down, then unceremoniously collapsed on the pallet beside him. A combination of exhaustion and shock had turned his legs to jelly. He would never do a kind thing ever again! Never ever!

He would be mean and ruthless and—

The cub snuffled. Shang Qinghua shifted onto his side to look at him. Demon or not, the little guy was unfairly cute while asleep.

Shang Qinghua's fingers twitched. He managed to hold off for the briefest of moments before the allure of that fur overtook him. His hand stroked down the cub's back. Once, twice.

"How are you this soft?" Shang Qinghua yawned. And with his fingers still gently petting, he dozed off between one breath and the next.

His unconscious reprieve was short lived.

It was still dark out when the prick of razorsharp claws dug deep into his flesh, flinging him back into the waking world. "Bad kitty!" he cried out, pulling his hand away. His back was sticky with sweat from the humid night air and yet somehow his forearm was coated in frost, branching out from the puncture wounds. Shang Qinghua rubbed at his arm to try and warm it up, careful of his strange new injury.

He grimaced at the—definitely demonic—cub who simply rested his furry head on those dangerous paws, looking wronged. Shang Qinghua gulped; if he didn't play his cards right, who knew what that demon would do to him next!

"I was talking about a different bad kitty just now," Shang Qinghua assured. "Obviously not you." He cleared his throat at the cub's unimpressed look. "Are you hungry? For um, flesh that isn't mine?"

The cub perked up; the tip of his fluffy tail twitched. Shang Qinghua took that as a yes and rushed to scrounge up anything that could be vaguely edible for an animal. If he was good at one thing, it was surviving. And if that meant sucking up to a baby demon then that was what he would do!

Surely it wouldn't be for long. The cub was healed up and there was nothing about Shang Qinghua that enticed others to stay so...

Yeah. He would be alone again soon. Just how he liked it.

Mobei-Jun didn't like being alone.

Snow leopards were solitary creatures by nature. And though Mobei-Jun's father had kept his distance while alive, the little cub was used to clinging to his uncle's side. He had once asked his uncle why that was the case, why demons of their family line were so cold to each other.

Linguang-Jun merely smiled and said, "You'll learn when you're older."

And he was right.

Mobei-Jun was technically older by a few moments when his uncle threw him to the wolves. He fought as valiantly as he could but he was still quite young by demon standards. The throne, empty after his father's recent death, was not yet his. The power that was his birthright would take years to be passed on.

As he stumbled away, bleeding and in pain, the lesson sunk in. He didn't understand why his uncle would betray him; he had no way of knowing what had upset Linguang-Jun enough to hurt him. All he knew was that he was now alone.

It was better to be cold and alone.

But then warm human hands lifted him from the unforgiving ground.

Shang Qinghua might have been too good at sucking up.

It had been three entire weeks of treating that little demon like kitty royalty, and the damn thing had made no move to leave. Either the cub had nowhere to go or he really liked being pampered by the long-suffering human.

It was probably the latter.

"Young master," Shang Qinghua pleaded

as he pulled the fabric of his pants away from the claws attempting to shred it. "If you don't let me leave, then I can't make money. If I don't make money, then I can't feed you. Do you understand?"

With his paws free, the cub simply sat there for a moment. Then he blinked once and calmly rolled onto his back, baring his stomach to the air. His expression stayed as cool as ever but his paws were curled endearingly, head tilted. Such an obvious trap!

But even knowing it was a trap, Shang Qinghua still had to force himself to resist the temptation to go in for belly rubs. The cruelty of this demon knew no bounds!

"I'll be back soon," he promised and flung the door open in his rush to leave. But instead of walking out as he had intended, he smacked straight into a wall.

"Well, isn't this an interesting turn of events," the wall said, an amused lilt to its cold voice.

Shang Qinghua took a halting step back. A demon stood in his doorway. That was the only thing that man could be. He was tall, draped in dark robes that swirled with a faint pattern reminiscent of nighttime frost. His face was youthful but his hair was the long, blinding white of snow beneath the sun. He smiled with teeth far sharper than any human.

"Nephew," the demon called sweetly over Shang Qinghua's head. "I've been looking all over for you."

The cub ducked his head low to the ground, eyes growing colder than Shang Qinghua had ever seen them. He growled.

The demon chuckled. "Now, now, Mobei. Don't be like that. Uncle didn't mean to

lose sight of you. And look, you found a pet human." He gave Shang Qinghua a passing glance as he slunk past, an inherent danger to his graceful movements. "So little Mobei-Jun's impromptu adventure can't have been too bad, hm?"

He crouched down, palm outstretched to pat his nephew's head. Mobei-Jun hissed and swatted at his fingers but the demon wasn't deterred in the slightest. He turned a mild smile up at Shang Qinghua as Mobei-Jun gripped his hand with fierce little paws, gnawing at it relentlessly.

Shang Qinghua was frozen in place. He had never felt more like *prey* than he did under that man's chilling gaze.

Mobei-Jun suddenly let go and padded over to wind between Shang Qinghua's legs, dragging against him. Shang Qinghua knew by now that this was the signal to pick him up. So he hefted Mobei-Jun to rest against his chest.

"You," the demon said.

Shang Qinghua blinked. It took him a beat too long to realize the demon was addressing him. He pointed shakily to himself with his free hand. "Me?"

The demon's answering smile truly was too wide, his canine teeth too pronounced. "It appears my wayward nephew has grown fond of you."

Fond!? If that's what you call biting me constantly and ripping my clothes to shreds then sure! I guess!!

Shang Qinghua absentmindedly stroked Mobei-Jun's back. "Ahaha yeah..."

"I would hate to separate you two. Tell me, human." The demon rested his cheek in one claw-tipped hand. "Are you in need of employment?"

"Yes." No hesitation!

"I have recently become the interim head of my household and I'm looking for a new servant. Interested?"

Shang Qinghua thought for a mere moment, silently weighing the pros and cons. Work for demons or starve...

Of course he was gonna work for demons!

And so, without any pomp and circumstance, Shang Qinghua packed up his meager belongings and left his empty home with a clawed hand at his back and a snow leopard cub tripping his feet.

Linguang-Jun had a plan.

Kill his nephew, take the throne, live out the rest of his horrifically long existence with endless power at his fingertips and no one by his side. Now that last bit wasn't meant to garner sympathy, though one could argue it was pitiable nonetheless.

For you see, Linguang-Jun wanted to be alone. No one could ever leave you if you didn't have anyone in the first place. He was just being practical.

Oh, but don't get him wrong. He didn't want Mobei-Jun to die just yet. His irritation regarding the line of succession had merely gotten the best of him; he knew his nephew would survive.

His big plan was a long term thing. Betraying Mobei-Jun's trust was meant to teach the child a lesson. Don't grow attached to anything. It never ended well.

But his nephew was a poor student and managed to find that silly little human.

No matter.

Linguang-Jun prided himself on his ability to adapt.

Remember how your humble narrator said Shang Qinghua was unlucky? Well, even omniscient beings can be wrong! He hadn't been unlucky before.

But he certainly was now.

When he became Linguang-Jun's servant he figured he would wash some clothes, make some tea, mend whatever needed mending, et cetera and so forth. Maybe he would even have a little spending money and be able to go to town every so often...

"I'm sorry," Linguang-Jun laughed, "I must have misheard you. Did you ask if you could get paid time off? I don't even know what that means."

Shang Qinghua was elbows deep in sudsy water. Laundry was a balancing act of doing his job and keeping Mobei-Jun from trying to lick various wet things—most of the time those things being Shang Qinghua himself—so he was nearly unbalanced when Linguang-Jun leaned down to give him a strong pat on the back.

"You're funny for a human. Next you'll be asking me to pay you in coin."

Shang Qinghua's self preservation instincts were strong; he held his tongue even though

he wanted nothing more than to yell that yes, actually! He would like to be paid with more than a tiny room in a freezing palace high up in the mountains and a weekly stipend of however many pieces of fur Mobei-Jun left all over his bed. And his clothes. And the floor! How did one little guy shed so much?!

But silence was safe. Smiling was safe. So he washed the clothes and smiled like he was in on the joke as he watched Linguang-Jun saunter away.

Mobei-Jun dragged his rough tongue along the back of Shang Qinghua's hand. Used to it, Shang Qinghua only sighed and let him.

"Young master is so considerate. If you keep this up, I won't need to waste time with a bath," Shang Qinghua quipped with unexpected fondness. Mobei-Jun bumped his cold nose against Shang Qinghua's fingers, turning anticipatory eyes up at him.

Shang Qinghua's smile softened, becoming more true than the subservient one he graced Linguang-Jun with. He gave Mobei-Jun's head a few gentle pets, completely unaware of Linguang-Jun's lingering presence and the piercing gaze he threw back toward them.

So the years went on like that.

With Shang Qinghua being worked to the bone, given more and more logistical tasks while still having to take care of the laundry. All of which he was expected to do while being followed around by the fast growing snow leopard who loved to get in his way.

Mobei-Jun had even taken over Shang Qinghua's small bed! It wasn't a big deal when he was still a cub and they could smush in together but Mobei-Jun was huge now! Shang Qinghua had given up on the possibility of ever getting his bed back; he slept on the floor.

He told himself it was a better life than the one he had before. And it might have been. He certainly wouldn't have chosen to go back to living alone in the woods and subsisting on scraps, but he had also grown tired. Of being treated poorly, of the way his back twinged from sleeping on the hard ground, of...of almost everything! His grievances were too many to count.

If only he could be free of it all.

Ah, but it was foolish to wish for such things.

And most of the time, Shang Qinghua only *pretended* to be a fool.

Mobei-Jun wasn't foolish.

He read books—yes, he managed it with those big paws—and he knew exactly how best to court another man.

Stake your claim. He often rubbed against Shang Qinghua to mark his scent. Show affection. Shang Qinghua's hands and cheeks were practically raw from how much Mobei-Jun licked them. Sleep together. When didn't they sleep in the same room?

And his blatant romantic advances were obviously reciprocated. Why else would Shang Qinghua sleep with his back turned? That was trust.

It was only a matter of time before Mobei-Jun inherited his father's powers and gained the ability to inhabit a human form. Then he wouldn't need to bother with his uncle anymore. He wouldn't have to fend off any of Linguang-Jun's half-hearted attempts at arranging a marriage for him. He wouldn't have to go to any ridiculous matchmaking festival or refuse whatever demon girl was sent over to be part of his nonexistent harem.

He could be done with it all, and properly take Shang Qinghua as his mate.

The village down the mountain from the demons' palace was relatively normal all things considered. There were more horns and sharp teeth than the average village but it wasn't unheard of for humans to mingle amongst the more demonic citizens.

Shang Qinghua had been sent to pick up a package Linguang-Jun had ordered. Naturally such minutiae fell to him, and naturally Mobei-Jun tagged along. Big, soft paws created a familiar rhythm at his side.

Everyone gave them a wide berth, knowing from past experiences that getting too close to Shang Qinghua was reason enough for Mobei-Jun's mood to sour. Shang Qinghua couldn't believe that after all this time, the snow leopard demon still hated him to such an extent that he scared away any possible connections.

Which was why it shocked him when a young lady rushed by, bumping into his shoulder. Knocked sideways by the force, he was pushed against Mobei-Jun. He put a hand on Mobei-Jun's sturdy back to prevent his fall.

"Ah, sorry!" The girl tried to help steady him but Mobei-Jun growled. She jumped back, hands to her chest. She had a woven basket under one arm and some of the contents—blue and purple flowers—had spilled out in the collision.

A single blue petal landed on Mobei-Jun's head. Shang Qinghua plucked it off and held it for Mobei-Jun to sniff. "It's fine. In a hurry?"

She blinked. "Gege, do you not know? The matchmaking festival is tomorrow!"

There did seem to be more people bustling around than usual... "Wait, did you say matchmaking?"

She nodded and bounced excitedly on the balls of her feet. "And I heard from an auntie that the king might come! He never leaves his palace. Oh, I bet he's handsome."

"Ha. Yeah, maybe." Shang Qinghua flicked the petal to the ground. Her face fell at his dry tone; he felt a little bad about spoiling her fun. To be polite, he asked, "Are you going?"

Before she could answer, Mobei-Jun clamped his jaw down on Shang Qinghua's robes and tugged. The demon's strength was no match for him. To avoid sprawling on the cold ground, Shang Qinghua let himself be dragged away.

"Hey, hey, okay!" Shang Qinghua extricated his robes from sharp teeth. "No more slacking, I get it."

Shang Qinghua sighed and went to complete his errand. Maybe it was the decorations or the excitement he could feel pulsing through everyone he passed, but he couldn't stop thinking about the matchmaking festival.

What would it be like to go to the festival and find a match? Ha! As if he had the time! Not to mention, he knew he definitely

wasn't a viable romantic interest for anyone. But he was good with his hands! He could do all sorts of household chores and bookkeeping.

Maybe if he went he could find someone who didn't mind that he wasn't good looking or that he spent XX amount of years as a servant. Maybe even someone rich who could take him away from here...

Someone like the king.

Shang Qinghua's steps faltered. The thought took him aback at first but, yeah. Like the king!

Okay. Yeah. Okay. Shang Qinghua was doing this. He was going to sneak out and seduce that reclusive king if it was the last thing he ever did.

He glanced down at Mobei-Jun who walked beside him, fluffy tail snug in his mouth.

Shang Qinghua would have to figure out a way to give his eternal shadow the slip, and also find something to wear that wasn't shabby and chewed to hell and back.

He truly had his work cut out for him.

Linguang-Jun learned how to hunt when he was just a little cub.

Stay quiet, stalk your prey, then go for the kill.

You didn't think he had forgotten about his plan, did you?

Shang Qinghua sighed, "I'll really have nothing to wear if you do that."

Mobei-Jun paused his attack on Shang Qinghua's sewing supplies. Fabric scrunched under his paws and a long strand of black thread tangled between his front legs. He tilted his head, one round ear flicking.

"But at the rate I'm going" —Shang Qinghua stuck a needle into the still unwearable outer robe— "you're more likely to meet a good match at the festival than I am."

He let out a brief chuckle, but not because he found the idea particularly funny.

Mobei-Jun had gone perfectly still, eyes cold as winter. Shang Qinghua shivered; it was as if all warmth had been sucked from the room. He exhaled and his breath hung white in the air. Mobei-Jun's ice powers had gotten stronger over the years. It was freezing.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Shang Qinghua smiled to try and diffuse the tension. He wasn't sure why Mobei-Jun's mood had dipped but he was going to turn into ice at this rate. "Do you not like festivals? The king—"

Mobei-Jun broke free of the thread and bounded over. Before Shang Qinghua could think to do anything, the robe had been wrenched from his hands and ripped to shreds by large teeth and sharp claws.

All of his carefully collected supplies were quickly in ruins, strewn across the floor in pieces. Shang Qinghua blinked at the mess. He picked up a shred of white fabric and numbly held it between forefinger and thumb. Part of it was frozen; it stuck to his skin.

Well. It looked like he would have to show up to the festival in the rags he had on. No. Actually, it looked more like he wouldn't be going to the festival at all. It was stupid to think he could go anyway. How would he have snuck out? How would he have made anyone fall for him?

What a ridiculous idea to have ever entertained.

His heart felt odd. A little sore.

But it was fine! This was for the best.

He couldn't quite bring himself to look at Mobei-Jun and unceremoniously doused the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. He heard a low chuff from Mobei-Jun but ignored it, choosing instead to take his usual place on the floor. With that sour feeling filling his chest, he curled up and went to sleep.

Mobei-Jun couldn't sleep.

Not after what he'd done. His feelings had gotten the better of him; he understood



that now.

So he quietly padded out of the room and left Shang Qinghua alone for the first time since they had met.

There was something important he had to do.

Shang Qinghua awoke with the pale sun on his face and the sudden unfortunate remembrance of last night.

He turned over to look at his empty bed and—

Empty?

Shang Qinghua sat up. Mobei-Jun was always there when he woke up. Every single day without fail the snow leopard had been there to make his life difficult. But that wasn't the only oddity. The floor was spotless, all of the ruined fabric and unspooled thread was gone. In their place was a rectangular box.

Shang Qinghua rested his fingers against the seam. Surely this wasn't for him. But it was in his room so no one could blame him for opening it, right?

He lifted the lid.

The contents of the box were startlingly blue. It was a beautiful set of robes made from kingfisher feathers and fabric so smooth and fine that Shang Qinghua couldn't hold back the urge to rub it against his cheek. Something glittered beneath the robes—a pair of golden shoes. They shimmered like the scales of fish beneath the sun, darting and weaving through shining currents. And

they seemed to be just his size.

Shang Qinghua couldn't believe his eyes. This had to be a mistake. Who could have left these for him? The only other being who even came into his small room was Mobei-Jun but after that performance last night, it was clear the snow leopard demon hated him more than ever.

He swiveled his head around to check that the coast was clear before he tried on the clothes. It was a perfect fit! He shakily slipped on the shoes and took a hesitant step.

The expected sound of the soft heel never came. Shang Qinghua turned in a slow circle. His footsteps made no sound at all. How odd.

This would make his escape to the festival much easier!

With lifted spirits, Shang Qinghua quickly put the shoes and clothes back into the box and hid it beneath his bed, then went about his daily chores with a spring in his step. There must have been an invisible guardian spirit looking out for him because his luck had never been that good before.

It was funny how anticipation played with one's perception of time. Shang Qinghua felt that each moment of the ensuing day passed with painful slowness. Though, that might have had something to do with the lack of Mobei-Jun.

As he washed clothes and hung them to dry, he found himself missing the snow leopard's presence. He had gotten used to having that big nuisance at his side. Shang Qinghua kept an eye out, waiting for the demon to appear as he always did but he was nowhere to be found all day.

Shang Qinghua still hadn't seen hide nor

hair of Mobei-Jun by the time night fell. As he donned his new outfit, he pushed aside the strange feeling in his chest. He decided it was just anxiety for the escape to come, and definitely not loneliness or anything like that. There was no reason to dwell on it; he needed to focus on sneaking out.

It wouldn't be too difficult. Probably.

It had begun to snow. Soft fabric swished against his calves as he walked. He needed to be swift and cautious. There were no other servants who worked in this grand palace but there were demons. And there was Linguang-Jun.

Shang Qinghua took a careful peek before entering the main courtyard. There was no one in sight. He was almost in the clear, he just needed to—

"Ah, little human." Linguang-Jun fell into step beside him. "Just where do you think you're going?"

Shang Qinghua's breath caught. "Oh, um. I can't find Mobei-Jun. I was...looking for him?"

"How sweet. It's a pity that you will never find him." Linguang-Jun sped up so that he stood in front of Shang Qinghua. His lips curled; sharp fangs poked out. "But don't worry. I will make sure he finds you."

And he plucked a snowflake out of the air, looked at it for an instant, then flicked it at Shang Qinghua's leg.

It felt like Shang Qinghua's thigh had been turned to ice; the cold hit him before the pain. He pressed his hands to the wound in shock before he fell, his leg giving out from under him. Blood welled between the cracks of his fingers, dyeing the blue fabric a sickening red.

"I have waited far too long for this moment." Linguang-Jun took an unhurried step closer. "For my wretched nephew to finally leave your side. But now with him off sulking, I can finally end your ridiculous life."

Shang Qinghua looked up at Linguang-Jun in disbelief. "You want to kill me?"

"Obviously." Linguang-Jun stepped down on Shang Qinghua's injured leg. There was a terrible creaking sound before the bone snapped with ease. Shang Qinghua didn't cry out but only because he couldn't seem to gather enough air. "You're not very bright, are you?"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Shang Qinghua gasped. He could barely think but he knew he should stall while he tried to figure out how to get out of this mess. "What did I do to offend my lord?"

"Nothing."

"Then how long have you wanted to kill me?"

Linguang-Jun tilted his head. "Since we met."

"It's been years!" Shang Qinghua let out a helpless, pained laugh. "You're a demon! Why wait?"

"Well, I couldn't do it in front of Mobei,"

Shang Qinghua blinked. That was actually kind of sweet.

"The whole point of feeding your flesh to him would be moot if he knew beforehand. I need him to learn his lesson this time."

OH! NOT SWEET!

Okay, it looked like there was no bargaining with Linguang-Jun and Shang Qinghua couldn't come up with a clever plan. He

gave up on trying and instead struggled to escape from under Linguang-Jun's boot; the movement jostled his injured leg. He bit back a scream but he managed to yank himself free and get to his feet. He felt a brief flash of triumph before it occurred to him that Linguang-Jun was so much stronger. He must have let Shang Qinghua go.

"Are you going to run?" Linguang-Jun seemed amused. "How far do you think you'll get?"

In a flash, he grabbed Shang Qinghua's arm and *pulled*. Shang Qinghua's brain went completely blank, his eyesight whited out with pain and before he realized he had opened his mouth, he called: "Young master!"

Linguang-Jun chuckled; his grip tightened, claws pierced through fabric to dig into Shang Qinghua's skin. Shang Qinghua squeezed his eyes shut and braced for what would come next.

Except...

Nothing happened.

"Let. Go." The voice that spoke was low and fierce. Angry.

Shang Qinghua peeked one eye open and saw the most handsome man he had ever seen. Tall with flowing dark hair and piercing blue eyes. Familiar blue eyes.

Mobei-Jun gripped Linguang-Jun's wrist and yanked it away. With nothing to hold him up, Shang Qinghua plopped to the cold snow below. His breaths came in harsh pants as he glanced up. Mobei-Jun was already looking down at him.

Shang Qinghua's heart skipped a beat. It must have been from the pain of his wounds haha... obviously.

"Ungrateful nephew!" Linguang-Jun threw a punch with his free hand but Mobei-Jun

Gold Shoes, Soft Paws

Gold Shoes, Soft Paws

caught it. "You couldn't wait until I had cooked him up for you? You had to stomp your way into the kitchen early?"

"He is mine," Mobei-Jun growled. Ice climbed from his fingers and began to coat Linguang-Jun.

A little ice was nothing for a fellow demon but it was a nice distraction for Mobei-Jun to kick his uncle's leg out from under him. Linguang-Jun fell to his knees.

"Mobei." Linguang-Jun's smile was only a little strained. "Can't you give your beloved uncle some face? I was trying to teach you a lesson!"

"I have nothing to learn from you."

Linguang-Jun clicked his tongue. "Unfilial. You and your father truly are cut from the same cloth."



Linguang-Jun slumped to the ground, passed out cold, Mobei-Jun turned his icy gaze back to Shang Qinghua.

Shang Qinghua swallowed, mouth gone suddenly dry. There was something about Mobei-Jun's expression; it was soft, yet wary. Like a cat slinking back after it had run away. As if he didn't know if he would be welcomed back.

So Shang Qinghua made the first move. He held out his hand, and Mobei-Jun stepped closer to help him to his feet. Mobei-Jun's hands were cold and he used a little too much force; Shang Qinghua stumbled and nearly fell but Mobei-Jun caught him.

Then he unceremoniously hefted Shang Qinghua into his arms like a sack of potatoes. Shang Qinghua hissed through his teeth. Be a little more gentle, ah? It hurts! It really hurts!

"Um, thank you for saving me but—" He broke off as Mobei-Jun adjusted his position and started to walk out of the palace. Uh, wrong direction! "W-where are you taking me? I'm kind of bleeding a lot right now ahaha..."

"I thought you wanted to go to the festival," Mobei-Jun said coolly, his lips downturned in a slight pout. "To meet a good match."

Shang Qinghua didn't know whether to laugh or cry! Not only was he too injured to do anything right now, but why did Mobei-Jun sound like a spurned lover?

"It's fine, it's fine! I don't need to meet anyone new." Under his breath, he added, "No king would go for me now anyway."

Mobei-Jun seemed to perk up after hearing that. And as he turned to bring them back inside he asked, "Do you like them?"

"Eh?"

"The robes," Mobei-Jun clarified. There was an almost shy tint to his chilly voice.

Shang Qinghua was speechless. So Mobei-Jun was the one who gifted them! But why?

"Of course this humble servant likes them! I should have known such nice clothes belonged to you."

"Qinghua also belongs to me."

Shang Qinghua could feel his cheeks heat for some ungodly reason. But his blood soon ran cold. The robes got horribly messed up just now! Large patches of blue had gone rusty with blood. Mobei-Jun must have brought it up because he was upset!

"I'm sorry about the blood," Shang Qinghua rushed to say. "And the holes. I can fix it! I'm very good at mending."

Mobei-Jun raised an eyebrow. "Don't bother. I will get you more."

"Oh haha, that's very nice of you-"

"The husband of a king cannot wear rags."

"Right you are!" Shang Qinghua would agree with anything he said at this point. "The clothes make the man—wait, what?"

Mobei-Jun looked straight ahead, continuing to walk.

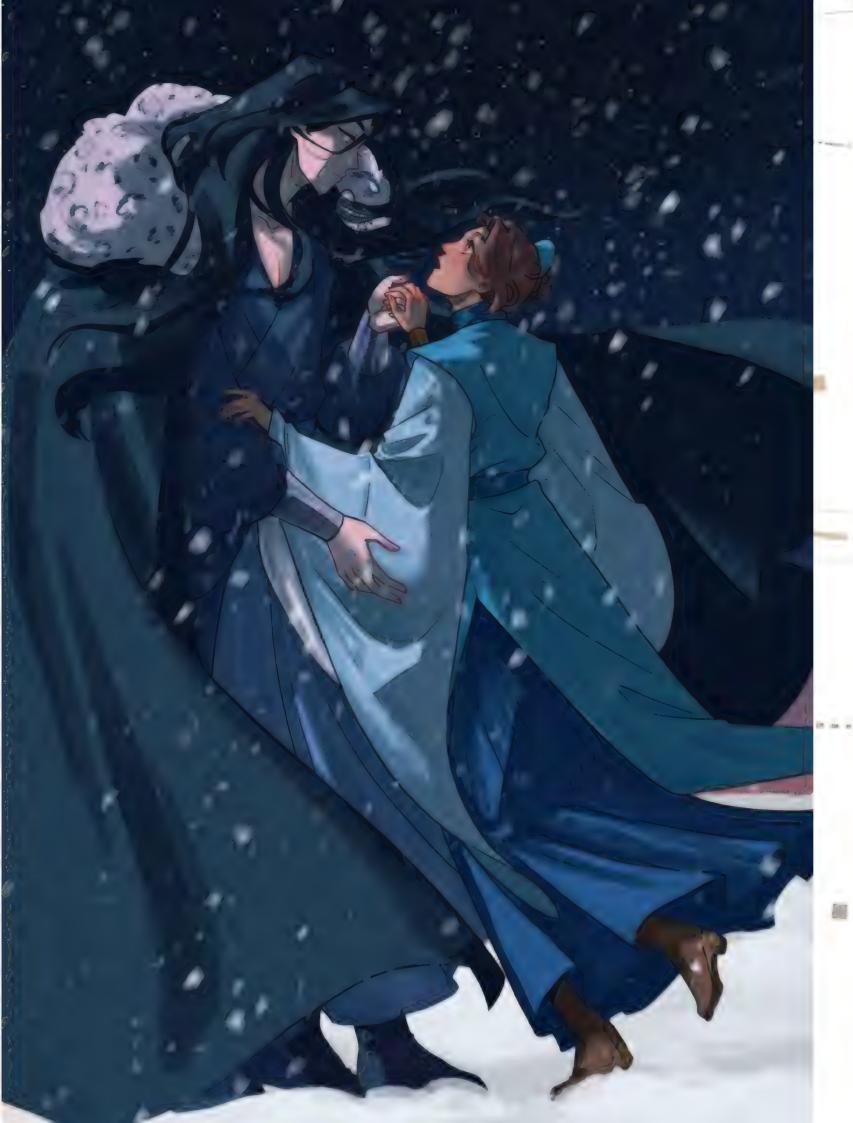
Shang Qinghua blinked. Then he blinked about fifty more times. "I'm not married to a king."

"You will be."

"Will be what?"

"Married," Mobei-Jun said. "To me."

"Are you" -Shang Qinghua was feeling



short of breath again— "telling me you're not just some demon prince? You're the king? The king king?!"

... 7

"WAIT, HUSBAND? MARRIED?!?!"

The air around them grew colder. Mobei-Jun's hands tightened. "Have you changed your mind?"

"No, I—" Maybe Shang Qinghua had lost too much blood because he was having difficulty comprehending the meaning of Mobei-Jun's words. "Who's the husband?"

"You."

"To who?"

Mobei-Jun was starting to look a little angry. The expression wasn't that different from when he was happy. He didn't say anything more.

Shang Qinghua let those words circle his brain for a while until it finally sunk in that Mobei-Jun had just done the weirdest, most backwards, proposal. And maybe this was because of blood loss too, but Shang Qinghua didn't even have to think about saying yes. Well, he didn't say it in so many words but he did lean woozily up to press a chaste kiss to the underside of Mobei-Jun's jaw.

Mobei-Jun's cheeks tinted blue. A low rumble started up in his chest—contented purring.

It seemed Shang Qinghua would never have to think about going to a matchmaking festival ever again.

The End.

"See? No need to commission Liu Su Mian Hua anymore," Shang Qinghua hung off of Mobei-Jun's arm as the latter finished reading his latest story.

"Mn."

"Well?" Shang Qinghua rested his cheek against Mobei-Jun's shoulder. "Does my king like it?"

Mobei-Jun was stone-faced for a long moment before he tossed away the pages of vaguely Ye Xian inspired RPF. Shang Qinghua let out a little *oomph* as Mobei-Jun picked him up and opened a portal that led right to their bedroom.

Yeah. He liked it.



THE LONELY CHOST

Rating:

General Audiences

Relationships

Mobei Jun x Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei Jun, Shang Qinghua

Tags

Reincarnation, Hurt/Comfort, Happy Ending

Summary

After his death, Shang Hua has resigned himself to a desolate, isolated existence as a ghost. But when he meets a demon one night, Shang Hua begins to feel things he never did in life.

Author:

BLUE KAIJU

Illustrated by:

Marciamallow

Once, there was a forest above an old farming village that was haunted by a lonely ghost.

The ghost was named Shang Hua. In life, he loved no one and was loved by no one, and he did not expect this to change in death.

He was cursed, chained to endless existence instead of passing on into reincarnation. He could not roam past the woods or the village, and he could not walk in the daytime. Trapped and forgotten, he lurked in a cold cave, hiding from the malicious spirits that roamed the woods while he waited to eventually fade into nothingness.

One evening, Shang Hua was rudely disturbed by shouting. It sounded like children playing, except for one small voice that cried out in pain.

Shang Hua dragged himself from his cave and found the source of the commotion: a group of young boys, probably from the farming village. They were hounding a smaller boy, throwing stones at his huddled form and laughing with the casual cruelty of children.

Shang Hua could not directly touch the world around him, but he could still pull a few strings. It didn't take much to startle the boys—a few rustling leaves here, some snapped twigs there, and, when the sun finally slipped below the horizon, the ghost emerged from the shadow of a looming red pine tree.

He appeared as he did at the moment of his death—clothes ragged from imprisonment, back streaked with blood and lash marks, and a gaping black wound in his throat from the botched beheading that left him bleeding out into the dirt.

The boys shrieked, all bravado vanished, and ran away, scrambling over each other

in sheer terror.

The bullied child, however, didn't run or scream. He simply stood and stared imperiously up at Shang Hua, as if the ghost were an errant servant.

"Who are you?" the child asked.

In the moonlight, Shang Hua saw that the child had the pointed ears and yellow eyes of a demon.

Did demons hurt ghosts? Shang Hua didn't know. But surely a child wouldn't be able to harm him too badly.

Shang Hua used his incredibly limited power to alter his appearance and make himself less frightening. "Are you okay?"

The child glared at him.

"Did they hurt you?"

Still nothing.

Shang Hua sighed with breath he didn't need. Were children always this uncooperative? "Is someone coming to get you? Like a parent?"

The demon child finally explained, while maintaining his distrustful glare, that his attendants were probably looking for him. He sat on a boulder. Shang Hua decided to wait with him, to ensure that the demon child was found by his guardians. Worse threats than village children lurked in the woods at night.

"I think you were very brave," Shang Hua said, breaking the sullen silence.

The demon child glanced at him from the corner of his eye.

"I mean it," Shang Hua said. "It's hard to face others alone like that. You did well."

"Who are you?" the child asked again, sounding more curious than demanding.

"Me?" Shang Hua asked. "I'm nobody. Just an old ghost."

In the distance, a pair of voices called out, "Young Lord? Young Lord, where are you?"

The demon child jumped up, his expression hopeful.

While the child was distracted, Shang Hua retreated into the shadows. He stayed long enough to confirm that the harried-looking demons who rushed toward the demon child were his attendants—they were—then returned to his cave.

The ghost settled in the darkest, quietest part of the cave and went to sleep. It took long, lonely years to learn how to succumb to the sleep, a numbness that made years pass like seconds and was the closest a ghost could come to oblivion. He slept, and he waited for the night he'd finally fade away forever.

He hadn't always done this. Once, he had a companion. Decades after his death, he'd stumbled across another ghost in the forest named Shen Yuan. They spoke, sometimes—Shang Hua about his unfulfilled dreams of being a storyteller, and Shen Yuan about his life as a spoiled, sickly son of a wealthy landowning family. They rarely agreed on anything, but having another person to speak to made the nights less lonely and cold.

It was good. But, like all good things in his life, it ended all too soon, and Shang Hua was alone again.

Hidden in his cave, Shang Hua sank into his familiar emptiness. Seconds stretched into minutes, which stretched into days, months, and years. He might have faded forever that time, if a sudden smell didn't jolt him from his trance.

It was irresistible, tickling the part of his mind that remembered good company, summer days, and a good story. Entranced, the ghost emerged from his cave and followed the scent into the forest. Even though the trees and grass were in the heady growth of summer, a light frost coated the flowers and leaves.

When Shang Hua returned to his senses, he stood in a dark glade he'd never seen before. Startled, he ducked behind a tree as he absorbed his surroundings. Flakes of snow drifted through the air, dancing around each other in gentle eddies. A gap in the dense forest canopy allowed moonlight to flood the center of the clearing, illuminating long grass, frozen wildflowers, and a lone man standing before the remains of a crumbling stone shrine.



The man was tall, with long dark hair and beautifully intricate blue robes. His broad shoulders were made to look even broader by his thick, fur-lined cape. He watched the forest, regal scowl etched on his face, as if he were impatiently waiting for someone.

The stranger stood beside the source of the scent: a bowl of wine resting on the shrine.

Other spirits lingered behind the surrounding trees, watching the wine with greedy eyes. Some were old, nearly lost to time, but many were powerful, evil spirits. One of the strongest broke from cover and rushed towards the offering, but the strange man glared with furious yellow eyes, and the spirit cringed and retreated like a dog.

He was a demon. Shang Hua should have left, but the offering called to him as spilled blood called to a starving fox.

Slowly, Shang Hua walked toward the shrine. The demon didn't stop him, so the ghost darted forward and inhaled the vapors from the offering before the demon changed his mind. Being near the strange wine gave him strength the way food or sunlight gave a mortal body strength. He lingered over the offering and felt energy slowly seep into his form.

After a few final breaths, he remembered the demon standing beside him.

"I'm sorry!" the ghost cried, backing away. "Forgive me! I know that wasn't for me!"

"It was," the demon said.

Up close, the stranger was even more terrifying, but Shang Hua could see how beautiful he was as well. His eyes were especially arresting; a sharp, merciless gold.

Shang Hua had seen those eyes before.

Recognition dawned. "You're the demon

child."

The demon nodded. "The offering is yours. Take your fill."

Shang Hua wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, so he kept breathing in the essence of the offering, always aware of the demon's gaze on his back.

"Thank you," Shang Hua said, once he finished. Fresh energy coursed through his form like snowmelt strengthening a river. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so full of life.

"Who are you?" the ghost asked.

"I am Mobei-Jun, King of the Northern Deserts," the demon said. "I never forgot the aid you provided me, but I was preoccupied securing my place as my father's successor. I did not have the chance to find you before now."

Then the demon turned to leave. "Consider your service repaid. Goodbye."

"Wait! Wait, wait, wait!"

Shang Hua rushed to block the demon's path. Mobei-Jun stopped and glowered down at him. He must have appeared ridiculous—Shang Hua wasn't a short man, but the top of his head only reached the demon's shoulder.

Shang Hua had managed to live his afterlife without aggravating any powerful ghosts, but how long would that last? He wanted to fade away to nothing peacefully, not to get painfully ripped apart for a second time.

Who better to offer protection than a king of demons?

"This gift is too generous!" Shang Hua said. "Surely, there is something I can do for you in return?"

"I need nothing!" the demon snapped. "My rule is unquestioned, and my kingdom is strong."

Shang Hua flinched back. It'd been long years since he was a low-level magistrate groveling to his superiors; apparently, he didn't remember how to act. "Of course, Your Highness."

Mobei-Jun glared a moment longer, then muttered something.

"Your Highness?"

The demon repeated himself. "There...are some issues with land distribution."

Mobei-Jun explained his plight. His father, the former ruler of the clan, had died suddenly, kicking off a war of succession. Mobei-Jun had triumphed, but he now had to deal with vanquishing rivals, satisfying his people, and everything else that came with inheriting a war-torn demon kingdom.

Hearing the demon's plight cheered the ghost. Now here was a way to work himself into the king's good graces! "I used to do such work when I was alive," Shang Hua said. "Come back tomorrow night with maps of your kingdom and fiefdoms, and I will assist you."

"Come back with me instead," Mobei-Jun said. "I will show you in person."

Shang Hua chuckled. "Unfortunately, I'm stuck. I can move through the forest and village, but that's it. Not nearly enough to reach your kingdom, I fear."

Mobei-Jun glowered again, but only said, "Very well," and left.

Shang Hua didn't think he'd ever see the demon king again, but the ghost returned to the shrine the following night and found Mobei-Jun waiting with a new offering and maps of the northern demon kingdoms.

Solving the land distribution issue was not an easy task. Based on what Mobei-Jun told him, northern demons as a whole seemed incredibly stubborn and prone to violence. Shang Hua's early suggestions for solutions were quickly negated—these clans couldn't stand each other, this one shouldn't be given access to that resource, et cetera, et cetera.

Still, it was a question of resources in the end, and if Shang Hua had learned anything from his old life, it was how to distribute resources. After a very long night, Shang Hua came upon a solution that even Mobei-Jun agreed should work.

It would be too forward to ask for employment right then, so Shang Hua only said, "Please, come back if you need any more help, Your Highness."

Mobei-Jun left without a parting word.

Again, Shang Hua doubted the king would return, but a few nights later, he was roused from his solitude by the scent of another offering.

Mobei-Jun was waiting for him beside the crumbling shrine. His robes were even more beautiful than the last time, jeweled and embroidered with skill Shang Hua didn't realize demons possessed.

"It worked," Mobei-Jun said, "but there are still issues with the coffers."

So Shang Hua got to work. Handling money had never been his official duty, but when he was alive, senior assistants passed work on to him that they didn't want to bother with, and a great deal of that had been financial.

"This should work," the ghost said, after he and Mobei-Jun worked out a plan. "Though,

it would be a lot easier if there was a way for me to leave with you. What's it like in your kingdom, anyway?"

"Cold," Mobei-Jun answered, and left before Shang Hua had a chance to ask anything else.

The next time Mobei-Jun visited him, he was struggling with traitors in his staff. From the stormy look on his face and the blood encrusted under his claws, it clearly hadn't been going well.

After Shang Hua provided his council, but before the king left, Mobei-Jun said, "It's beautiful."

"Your Highness?"

"My kingdom," Mobei-Jun explained. "It holds mountains and plains and glaciers. It is cold in the summer and inhospitable in the winter, even for demons. Life is a constant struggle, and death is everywhere. But still, it's beautiful."

Mobei-Jun left, and Shang Hua returned to his cave.

The demon king visited again, and again, and again. Each time, he brought one of his kingdom's troubles with him. Each time, Shang Hua would assist to the best of his ability. Each time, the ghost would forget to ask for some promise of protection.

Instead, he kept asking about Mobei-Jun's home. Each time before he left, the king would share something new about himself. Things like the harsh beauty of his homeland, the palace he grew up in, the fortress he lived in now. Shang Hua listened and imagined the sting of the icy wind on his skin, or the rush of cold from breathing winter air into his lungs.

The more he thought of Mobei-Jun and

his kingdom, the more stifling the cave became. The ghost began spending nights outside whenever possible, even if he occasionally strayed too long before sunrise and the odd ray of sunlight left him weak and lightheaded.

As he wandered, he became more aware of the humans passing through the forest. He noticed travelers who'd taken a wrong turn or children who wandered too far from home. Because he had nothing else to do, he guided them back to the paths with flickering lights, well-timed rustling branches, or a whisper in the wind.

Once rescued, the humans hurried out of the forest, never once looking back. Shang Hua didn't think his guidance would amount to anything, until one evening he came across a little wayward shrine on the side of the road. It was a humble thing, roughshod and amateurly crafted. A villager he vaguely recognized left a small offering, thanking a spirit for protecting him on his journey through the forest.

"It's strange," he told Mobei-Jun a few nights later, when the demon king needed his assistance once again. "They're asking me for help. Me!"

"It's what I'm doing," Mobei-Jun pointed out. "They aren't wrong to do so. You are useful. Occasionally."

"Hey!"

The king's face stayed impassive, but his eyes brightened—his own version of a smile.

Eventually, the problems Mobei-Jun brought him became smaller and smaller, matters that barely took Shang Hua an hour to solve. Shang Hua wondered with a heavy heart when Mobei-Jun would finally leave now that the ghost's usefulness was waning. He didn't have much to distract him from

The Lonely Ghost The Lonely Ghost

his inevitable abandonment-malicious spirits were oddly absent now, so he didn't have that ever-present danger to worry about anymore.

One night, Mobei-Jun came to him with downcast eyes and slow steps.

"What troubles you, Your Highness?" Shang Hua asked. "Is your kingdom in danger?"

Slowly, Mobei-Jun shook his head. He wouldn't meet Shang Hua's eyes. "Nothing is wrong," he said. "My kingdom is unified, peaceful, and orderly. It is more prosperous than when my father reigned."

Shang Hua slowly moved forward, as if approaching a wounded animal. "You know," he said slowly, "you can always come see me if you want to."

"I will."

Shang Hua wouldn't let himself read too much into how quickly the king spoke, or the intensity in his eyes. "Please, come with me. I want to give you something."

Shang Hua led the way through the forest, Mobei-Jun following close behind. His steps were loud in the relative silence of the forest. Shang Hua didn't make any sound at all.

The ghost led Mobei-Jun to his roadside shrine. A few physical offerings now littered the base.

"There's a ring in the grass, by that beech root. Please pick it up."

It was a beautiful piece of jewelry, the most valuable offering by far. It was slightly worn but still skillfully made, crafted with great care and precision out of high quality gold.

Mobei-Jun picked it up and held it in his hands. Slowly, Shang Hua moved closer

and cupped Mobei-Jun's hands with his own. He wondered what the demon's skin felt like. He'd never been so close to the king, and for a moment he was tempted to voice the feelings growing in his heart.

"You became king before you found me, right?" Shang Hua asked. He didn't dare look at the king directly, so he kept his gaze firmly on the ring. "It occurred to me that I've never presented you with a coronation present. You deserve so much, but this is all I can give you."

If he kept speaking, his feelings would become all too apparent, so he tried to change the subject. "Have you found anyone to rule beside you, Your Highness? Life is short-you should find someone while you can."

Mobei-Jun was alive, and he should build a real life in his hard-won kingdom of ice and snow-not waste his time in a barren human forest with a nothing ghost.

Mobei-Jun's hands fell away, passing through Shang Hua's own. "No," Mobei-Jun said quietly. "There is no one."

But his voice was so heavy, it was obvious there was someone on his mind. Had he been rejected? But who would reject the king of the north?

"Your Highness," Shang Hua said, "please remember, you can come find me any time, no matter what."



And find him he did. As time passed, Mobei-Iun became a constant, like the sunset or the stars. The king did not come every day, and sometimes he was absent for a considerable amount of time, but he always came back.

It was strange to have someone waiting for him. It reminded Shang Hua of when Shen Yuan dwelled in the forest as well. Shen Yuan often called him a hack amateur storyteller, saying his stories were too ridiculous or sentimental (which may have been warranted-Shang Hua never had the opportunity to practice much). Still Shen Yuan was always waiting the next night for Shang Hua to share a new story, or to simply talk to him. Shang Hua didn't have friends in his mortal life, but he imagined it must have been similar to this.

He was happy, until one night, when Shen Yuan told Shang Hua in a quiet voice that he was ready to pass on.

Shang Hua didn't take it well. He had no idea that Shen Yuan had wanted to leave, or that it was even possible for him to do so. Shang Hua had snapped at him and retreated deep into his cave. He heard Shen Yuan call out to him, but he never responded. Eventually, the voice faded away completely, and when Shang Hua reemerged, he was alone again. And he thought he would stay alone for the rest of his non-life, until he met Mobei-Jun.

He hadn't bothered to consider how Shen Yuan felt. He only thought about how it felt to be abandoned and how his rotten luck extended even into his afterlife.

But knowing Mobei-Jun reminded Shang Hua of life's trials and joys, and he was forced to confront all he was missing. He ached to live again, the way Shen Yuan had gone to live again.

He tried to hide his growing strife from

Mobei-Jun. When the king visited, Shang Hua asked about the kingdom, Mobei-Jun himself, or his subjects. They became close enough that when Shang Hua asked about Mobei-Jun's family and the feud that led to the war of succession, Mobei-Jun answered. The demon spoke of his deceased mother, the distant father he'd barely known, the world where he's had to fight tooth and claw to exist. Shang Hua ached to embrace him.

One quiet night, Mobei-Jun asked how he died. Shang Hua somewhat gracelessly dodged the question. "It's not worth talking about, honest! Just an accident!"

Mobei-Jun looked at the blood on Shang Hua's clothes and the obvious sword wound on his neck, but said nothing.

The demon king began bringing small tokens and ornaments for Shang Hua's roadside shrine the nights that he visited. It almost reminded Shang Hua of the way a lover brought their beloved gifts.

One night, Mobei-Jun showed him the abandoned shrine where they'd first met-cleaned and restored into a proper shrine

"For you," the demon king said.

Shang Hua circled the structure, so flustered he thought his heart would begin beating again. "This is amazing! Far too much for a lowly ghost!" He inspected the care taken in cleaning it, removing the wear and exposure of the years. "I can't ever repay this," he said softly. "Thank you."

And for the first time, Shang Hua saw him smile a small barely-there smile. Shang Hua felt himself grow a little colder, a little emptier, as he realized with a heavy heart that he loved the demon king.

All too soon, Mobei-Jun had to leave. It was summer, and Shang Hua had to retreat to avoid the sun's rays. Mobei-Jun always offered to stay during the daytime. Shang Hua was always tempted to accept, but he felt guilty for depriving the king of time that would be better spent finding a promising, powerful demon to truly court.

Before he returned to his kingdom, the demon said, "I will not be able to return for several months at least. Wait for me." Mobei-Jun raised his hand, as if to reach out to Shang Hua, but let it fall. "I will return," he said. Then he left.

Shang Hua waited. What else could he do? He spent long days in the cave and lonely nights out in the forest, guiding lost villagers, watching the stars, and waiting for his king to return.

One night, while keeping his vigil, Shang Hua saw a strange light coming from the village. The sky was hazy and starless, as dark as a grave. Shang Hua hurried to the edge of the forest, dread heavy in his gut. As he broke from the trees, the sight before him was the stuff of nightmares.

The village, parched from a particularly hot and rainless summer, was on fire, its thatch roofs and wooden houses blazing like torches in the darkness. He saw villagers trying to fight fire, but it was clearly out of control, and they'd barely put a dent in the flames.

He ran to the edge of the village. The ghost felt strain in what was left of his soul, like bending a finger too far backward—he wasn't going farther than his limit, but he was beginning to push it. He stopped at the very edge of the village, behind a group of huddled villagers staring with transfixed horror as their homes burned down.

There were still people unaccounted for,

Shang Hua heard the villagers whisper amongst themselves in strangled terror. Shang Hua, acting before he thought better of it, moved through them and into the burning village itself.

He quickly found the first lost villager—a child, huddled in a corner of a burning shack, trembling and terrified. Shang Hua passed through the flames again and did his best to signal another villager, rushing by with a bucket of water. But the voices of the dead were soft, barely louder than a rustling branch, and the roar of the flames drowned him out.

Every time Shang Hua passed through the fire, he felt as if he were standing beneath a midday summer sun. Still, he moved through them again and again, pointing and shouting as best he could. Finally, a villager spotted him and stopped, startled by the apparition. Shang Hua recognized him—he was a villager the ghost once guided out of the forest.

The villager followed him, found the child, and quickly carried her to safety. Shang Hua kept going, guiding villagers to anyone who was hiding, lost, or trapped, until he'd found everyone who could still be saved.

By the time night began to fade, the village was empty. The villagers retreated to temporary shelters, away from the smoke and their smoldering homes.

Shang Hua was satisfied;—most of the villagers had survived,—but he was also exhausted in a way he'd never been before. He looked down and saw that his body was slowly growing more and more transparent.

When he died the first time, terror like nothing he'd ever known raced through him, burning across his mind and leaving oblivion in its wake. He couldn't bleed to death as a ghost, but his stumbling thoughts and the sense of imminent doom were all too familiar.

The ghost returned to the forest. He passed his roadside shrine without pausing. Likewise, he stumbled past the cave he spent decades in, huddled and alone, without a second thought. If he had to die again, he would die where he wanted, and he wanted to die at the old stone shrine, where Mobei-Jun had first found him.

Shang Hua didn't carry any regrets from his first life, because he didn't feel much for his life in general. He'd chased an assistant magistrate position, forgoing his dreams of storytelling to try to earn love from his family. He secured the position, but the love never came—they were angry, in fact, that he hadn't secured something better. They soon gave up on him and forgot him entirely. Shang Hua was stuck without family or friends in a place where cruelty and backstabbing were the norm. Bitterness ate at him, and he moved through life like a ghost, caring about nothing and no one.

He didn't lift a finger when he learned that his magistrate was conspiring to poison villages in a rival district. His inaction was noticed, eventually, after the deed was done and entire families had been wiped out. Shang Hua was found complicit, and he was summarily imprisoned and executed. He died alone and disgraced at nineteen, and he hadn't cared at all.

Now, though, dragging himself through the dark, he wanted to cry.

He wanted to see winter again. He wanted to see Shen Yuan. He wanted to see Mobei-Jun's kingdom of ice and demons. More than anything, he wanted to see Mobei-Jun himself.

If he was in one of the stories he loved so much, Mobei-Jun would have miraculously appeared, as if Shang Hua had called him. He would have some miracle cure, and he would whisk Shang Hua away to a new life by his side.

But it wasn't one of his stories. The ghost named Shang Hua vanished in the forest, reaching for the shrine just beyond him, utterly alone.

And that's where the story of the lonely ghost ends.

The villagers moved and resettled on a nearby stretch of river. Years passed seamlessly into decades. The forest stretched down from the mountain and swallowed the old village whole until it was a desolate place—untouched by mankind apart from rogues and bandits, known for its bitter cold even in the heat of summer and its stories of a lonely ghost.

The story spread far and wide. And, one day, the story attracted a man the way a worm on a hook attracts an unsuspecting fish. This man was a successful author, known for his fantastical retellings of old folktales ("Revitalized and reimagined!" he liked to say, while his favorite editor responded by calling him an amateur hack, even though his amateur days were long behind him by that point).

Sure, he added his own details, but he pulled the cores of his tales from common stories. One day, when searching for inspiration, he traveled to those dark, foreboding woods. The villagers in the area all had stories about a horrible fire from many years ago, and how their grandparents or greatgrandparents had been guided to safety by a ghost.

The author thought they were exaggerating to entice visitors, but it still sounded like a good basis for a story. When night fell, he entered the woods to see them for himself, and hopefully catch a glimpse of the snow that supposedly fell at night, no matter the season.

Scarcely an hour had passed before the author was hopelessly lost, and he didn't think he could escape on his own. Every dark tree and looming branch looked alike.

A branch snapped. At once, the author was surrounded by a group of bandits who must've been using the forest as a hideout.

The author turned to run, but a bandit grabbed him by his hair and threw him to the forest floor.

He gasped from the shock of pain and cold—it was barely autumn, but the ground was already frosting over.

A sharp knee dug into his back, and a knife prodded his throat. "Not a sound," the bandit hissed.

The author flinched, expecting a sharp cut to his neck and a swift end to his life. But the weight on his back suddenly disappeared. The bandit let out a muffled scream, and the author felt a gust of icy wind as the bandit hit the ground hard.

The other bandits rushed away into the trees, too terrified to scream. Someone, as tall and imposing as a king, stood over the bandit's prone body. White flakes of snow drifted through the air like cinders from a campfire.

It looked like a tall, handsome human man, clad in expensive robes and wearing a small necklace, but his aura of power was unmistakable. His yellow, demonic gaze met the author's, and the author felt colder than he thought possible.

The man ran.

He crashed through the dark, heart

pounding in his ears, sure he would soon hear the demon chasing him.

But no one followed him. The author stumbled to a stop, with the monster nowhere in sight. Maybe it was mad at the bandits, but not him?

All at once, the man got a ridiculous, terrible idea, the kind that would have made the editor hit him on the head with his fan.

Demons lived a long time—If he'd roamed the forest for even a part of his lifetime, maybe he knew more about the ghost and the fire?

The author crept back through the forest and quickly found the demon, his head bowed over an old shrine. When he turned to look at the author, his gaze wasn't furious, but devastated. He looked as if someone dear to him had just died.

"Hello!" the author said, trying not to sound as frightened as he felt. "I don't mean to intrude on your domain, but I've been hunting down stories of a ghost that once haunted these woods. Do you know something about it?"

The demon was still looking at him, and the pain on his face, illuminated by the weak predawn light, made the author's heart ache.

But then the demon grasped the necklace he wore, and his sadness gave way to a dark scowl. "No," he said, and he strode away into the dark forest.

"Wha-hey! At least think about it?"

Betraying all common sense, the author followed the demon deeper into the forest. "Maybe you've seen something? Or another demon in the forest knows something? If you're worried about compensation—"

"Enough!" the demon finally snapped. The author, wisely, stopped talking.

The sun was rising, and the author finally saw what the demon guarded so carefully—a ring, threaded on a thin chain.

"There was a ghost," the demon said, finally. His voice cracked. "There was a ghost," he said again. "I knew him. Long ago."

Even though the demon was finally speaking, the author wasn't looking at him. He stared instead at the way the ring's golden curves caught the light. His head began to hurt.

"He saved me, even though I didn't deserve it. He helped me, again and again, and I was never able to repay him. I wanted to take him with me—to my home. But he left. I was too slow and incompetent to help him."

The author looked at the demon and frowned. "What are you talking about? You never owed me anything."

The demon stared at him, eyes wide. The author blinked. All at once he remembered everything he'd forgotten from his old life. A deluge of memories—his first life, his death, his decades as a ghost, Mobei-Jun, the fire—flooded his mind.

Shang Hua stumbled, but the demon—no, Mobei-Jun—caught him before he fell.

Shang Hua stared at Mobei-Jun in disbelief. He was slightly taller, and there was sad exhaustion in his eyes, but otherwise he looked the same. "I never meant to leave you," he told the king, voice breaking. "I wanted to find you. I tried."

"I did not mean to leave you," the demon king said in return. "I was searching for a way to free you. When I returned, you were..." He paused, as if finishing the thought was too painful. Instead, Mobei-Jun moved slowly, as if Shang Hua would disappear again if he was too hasty, and gently cupped Shang Hua's cheek. The touch was feather light, but Shang Hua felt the shock of it reverberate through his entire body. Shang Hua felt him. He felt the slight chill of the demon king's skin, the gentlest touch of his claws, barely touching him.

There was so much Shang Hua wanted to say, but his words—his most trusted tool—had abandoned him.

"Shang Hua." Mobei-Jun's voice trembled with loss and relief, and Shang Hua couldn't stop himself from surging forward and kissing him.

It was a clumsy, awkward gesture, but he didn't have the time to feel embarrassed before he was pulled tightly against Mobei-Jun's chest as he was thoroughly, lovingly kissed in return.

Shang Hua thought he would die again from the sheer sensation of Mobei-Jun against his body, his skin, his lips. His whole afterlife he'd longed for warmth and heat, but nothing in his wildest imaginings compared to being in Mobei-Jun's arms. The warmth of the sun was a cinder compared to the heat kindling inside him as he threaded his hands--shaking with desperation--through Mobei-Jun's hair, across his shoulders, his back. The demon king returned Shang Hua's touches with the same burning desperation, Mobei-Jun's kisses so eager that Shang Hua felt fangs against his mouth, and he doubted that even standing in flames again could match the blaze lighting him from within.

Eventually, reluctantly, Shang Hua broke away, gasping for breath, and he pressed his forehead against Mobei-Jun's. "I'm home," he said.

As far as most knew, the author disappeared into those cursed woods. Perhaps the demon that stalked the forest had claimed its final victim--and, satisfied--left it behind, for no one ever saw it walk those woods again. Anyone who followed the author's works, though, would know that his stories were still mailed to his editor from wherever it was he disappeared to. The editor in question would complain to any who would listen about the hassle of correcting a manuscript via mail. All the same, when he eventually received an invitation to a wedding between the author and a mysterious new spouse, he went, a generous gift in hand.

Shang Hua forged a new life in a world of endless ice and shimmering auroras alongside Mobei-Jun. Mobei-Jun, his husband, never ceased to remind Shang Hua, in his own reticent, stoic way, how dearly he was loved, and Shang Hua cherished him dearly in return.

After a long, desolate road, the lonely ghost's heart was finally at peace.







THE LOST CONSORT

Rating: Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/ Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua, Linguang-Jun, Original Male Character

Tags

vague fairytale AU, some canon/fairytale typical violence, hidden identities, pining, eventual fluff, false bride narrative

Summary

As a young prince, Mobei Jun vowed to marry the man who saved his life during a chance encounter as soon as he became king. When word reached him of an ambush on the wedding procession and the disappearance and presumed death of his betrothed on the day of his wedding, he spent the next several years grieving. For the sake of his country, he agreed to a political alliance arranged by his uncle.

During his first meeting with his soon-to-be husband, Mobei-Jun was struck by the similarities his new fiance shared with his long lost love, at least some of the time. Confronted on the day of his wedding by two potential spouses, can he determine which is his true love, and which is the imposter seeking to lead a coup?

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On the day of Mobei-Jun's first wedding, flurries of snow danced across the sky as if they too celebrated with the young king. The day his second betrothed arrived, however, dawned with no such blessing.

As he moved through the halls to the throne room, he paid little attention to the commotion outside in the courtyard. In a brief moment of silence, he steeled himself for the arrival of the court, his uncle, and the Golden Hart clan. He had just settled on his throne when the doors opposite flew open, and Linguang-Jun strolled in wearing a sly smile.

"Nephew, how good of you to welcome us all. After the last time, gathering like this was truly a wise decision," he drawled, no doubt pleased he had finally managed to convince Mobei-Jun to accept a match after years of wheedling.

Mobei-Jun unclenched his jaw. "Uncle. I trust your travels were uneventful."

"Yes, quite well. Even the beast of burden behaved." He chuckled to himself. "You'll have to pardon your betrothed. Traveling for so long didn't agree with Zhen Yi. He retired directly after we arrived, but asked me to send his regards and inform you that he will join you for dinner later."

Mobei-Jun scoffed, "Fine. Since you're here, we should discuss the terms you mentioned in your last letter."

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"Tsk, so cold, Mobei. Not even a moment of concern for your betrothed? Such consideration is important in a marriage, you know."

"I brought you here for political, not marital, advice. If Zhen Yi is unwell, I'm certain his servants can provide more assistance than I."

"You needn't offer assistance to show you care." Linguang-Jun caught the eye of some of the courtiers with a knowing smile. "Ah, young ones. So impatient."

"The terms, Uncle. Or do you need to rest after travelling a day at your old age?"

A few of the courtiers from both parties joined Linguang-Jun's laughter. "See? So impatient—but hopefully more prudent now than before."

Ice crackled from where Mobei-Jun sat, gripping the arms of the throne tight enough for his claws to leave deep gouges.

"Now, now. No need for that. Very well, let us discuss these terms before you must meet Zhen Yi for dinner." He pulled out a scroll and settled into the chair at Mobei-Jun's side to begin discussion.

Several tedious hours later, courtiers and advisors all but fled the room as the temperature plummeted along with Mobei-Jun's patience. Only Linguang-Jun lingered, eyes glittering with apparent amusement.

"I must say, you certainly don't mince your words. That last petitioner barely said anything before you threw them out."

"They have been lying about their taxes for years. Why would I listen to their request for more money?" Mobei-Jun eyed his uncle warily. "What do you want?"

"Am I not allowed to want to talk with my nephew without an ulterior motive?"

"No."

Linguang-Jun laughed. "Your cynicism is so amusing. I simply thought you might like to know about a possible traitor in your midst without an audience."

"You know this, how?"

"I have my ways. I've been unable to discern the full details just yet, though. You should be wary. It would be a pity if, after finally securing an alliance to help solidify your rule, you lost everything due to carelessness." When Mobei-Jun didn't respond, he added, "Trust me to look into this for you. Have I ever led you astray?"

Already making plans to have his own spies look into the matter, he finally agreed, "Very well."

"Good! You should be spending this time getting to know Zhen Yi, after all." Flashing a serpent's smile, he added, "Speaking of, you wouldn't want to be late for your first dinner together, now would you?"

Ignoring his uncle's goading, Mobei-Jun stalked from the room to the great hall, where the sounds of the court washed over him while he waited. As the doors opened, the courtiers fell silent. Zhen Yi stood hesitantly in the doorway, his eyes darting over the assembled crowd.

Mobei-Jun crossed the room to greet him, indifferent to the whispers that started as he did so. "Zhen Yi," he said, holding out a hand.

Zhen Yi looked from his hand to his face and back again with a perplexing sort of trepidation. Several moments passed before he accepted the offer with his own trembling hand. "Mobei-Jun."

The whispers of the courtiers grew louder as they watched them cross the room. Mobei-Jun heard the man next to him, his soon-to-be husband, draw an unsteady breath and felt an unexpected twinge of pity. "Pay them no mind," he muttered. "They are simply curious and overly excitable." The grip on his hand tightened briefly, surprising him by how callused the palm was, as though the owner regularly

engaged in physical labour.

Zhen Yi's wide-eyed gaze shot up to meet Mobei-Jun's. He blinked up at him for a moment before dropping his head to look at the floor with a murmured, "Thank you."

"You were indisposed earlier. Are you recovered now?"

"Indisposed?" Zhen Yi replied, sitting carefully at the table. "Yes, I'm much better now!" He dropped Mobei-Jun's hand as though burnt and clasped his own together tightly in his lap.

Mobei-Jun frowned but shrugged. "The kitchens prepared a variety of specialties from the North. Eat whatever you like."

"Really?" The other man perked up and eyed the dishes, focusing on a dish of sweets dusted with sugar.

"Mn." Mobei-Jun pushed the plate closer to him and watched him dispassionately.

The Golden Hart clan held substantial wealth, accumulated primarily through vast trade connections across the demon realm. Through the marriage, the North would gain access to these ties, greatly benefiting the outer villages where supplies grew scarce in the harshest months. In return, their clan would gain the political backing needed to expand their connections even further.

Zhen Yi had written effusively on the topic in many of his letters discussing the alliance's terms. From his writing, Mobei-Jun had expected him to be cut from the same cloth as his uncle: arrogant, self-serving, and disconcertingly comfortable in court. Yet now he sat twitching every time the noise from the courtiers grew particularly raucous.

As though sensing the gaze on him, Zhen Yi said, "Ah! My apologies, did you want some?" He flashed a small smile and pushed the nearly empty plate of sweets back towards Mobei-Jun, who grabbed the last one for himself. A couple of minutes later, as though the silence were intolerable, he asked, "Are you fond of sweets?"

"Not particularly."

"Oh. I see."

Mobei-Jun watched him fiddle with the cords of his belt before venturing to return the question in an effort to at least appear cordial.

Seeming surprised to be addressed despite the fact they were alone together on the dais, Zhen Yi started. "I suppose. Though, truthfully, I'm not sure I really tasted those very much." He grabbed his goblet, hiding a sheepish look in the bottom of the cup as he drank.

"Hoarfrost berries don't have a strong flavour."

Zhen Yi choked on the wine he had just swallowed. "H-Hoarfrost berries? Those are poisonous!"

"They can be, if not prepared correctly." Mobei-Jun nodded sagely.

"Please warn me before I eat something potentially poisonous, my king." Still coughing, Zhen Yi looked at him with watering eyes.

Mobei-Jun frowned at him. Though the address was common enough, few people ever called him anything other than his title. Only one, in fact.

"Mobei-Jun? Are you alright?" Zhen Yi's hand was outstretched, not quite touching him.

When he found his voice a moment later, it was cold despite his efforts to appear unaffected. "I'm fine."

"The pastries! You don't think the one you ate was bad, do you?"

"I said I am fine!"

Zhen Yi flinched and shrank back. "O-Of course! Sorry!" He glanced anxiously up at him, his knuckles white from how tightly he clenched his hands in his lap.

As though to make up for their sudden hush following Mobei-Jun's outburst, the court broke into even louder chatter than before. Despite the noise, an awkward silence lingered between Zhen Yi and Mobei-Jun while the rest of the meal was presented.

Suddenly, the thought of entertaining this man, either as a dinner guest or a potential spouse, was unbearable. "It has been a long day," Mobei-Jun said wearily. "Perhaps we ought to continue this tomorrow." Zhen Yi looked relieved, which did nothing to improve his mood.

As Mobei-Jun stood, he scrambled from his seat and gave a small bow. "Yes, of course! A long day, to be sure!"

"A servant will see you to your quarters."

"Good night, my king!"

Without looking back, Mobei-Jun opened a portal to his private quarters, itching to hunt. Even though a short hunt in the wilds would only just settle his mind, he called for his steward. "I am going hunting," he told the wizened old demon. "Turn away any who ask to see me. Including my uncle."

"Yes, Mobei-Jun. Will you be returning for court in the morning, or shall I move it to the afternoon?"

"I will be there." He was gone, out onto the ice fields before the steward finished bowing. With no destination in mind, he wandered, idly toying with the battered ribbon he kept wrapped around his wrist. His heart sat heavy in his chest as he traced embroidered designs he knew without sight—a variation of the Mobei clan crest intertwined with flowers. The design had been of his beloved's own handiwork. He remembered the warmth of his laugh as he explained that the design was a way to show they belonged to each other as though it happened mere days ago instead of years.

The ground rumbled as a beast, intent on protecting its home, approached. Summoning a sword of ice, Mobei-Jun attacked. He imagined the beast's pained cries came from his own heart, each slash of the blade a punishment for breaking his vow to marry no one but the little human who had once saved his life. Rumours of growing unrest hardly seemed reason enough for such a betrayal when he stood alone on the snow-covered plains, particularly when of all of his advisors, only Linguang-Jun had insisted on a marriage alliance.

With a final agonized bellow, the creature fell, and Mobei-Jun turned, ready for his next target.

Blood lingered under his claws when he arrived for court the next morning, tired but less on edge. The satisfaction of providing a nearby settlement with the spoils of a successful hunt did not last long. Zhen Yi sat in the seat next to the throne that was reserved for the ruler's consort.

It was a shockingly bold claim, but the other demon only stood and bowed, greeting him with a calm smile. "Mobei-Jun. I trust you slept well?"

He growled in response and dropped

onto the throne. Seeing someone who was essentially a stranger in the consort's throne, which had remained empty since his mother's passing when he was a child, set him on edge. He realized he had only ever imagined one person in that seat other than his mother, and it was not Zhen Yi.

The steward calling court to order interrupted his thoughts. "The Golden Hart clan will now present their requested changes to the alliance, after which counter points may be raised by the court or Mobei-Jun. The final decision shall be agreed upon by both parties and sealed with a marriage between clan heir Zhen Yi and King of the Northern Desert, Mobei-Jun. Do all present agree?"

The hall filled with noises of assent.

At a signal from the steward, Zhen Yi rose gracefully and turned a pleasant smile on the court. Mobei-Jun watched him present his ideas confidently with the air of someone used to pandering to the whims of courtiers and advisors. He appeared exactly as he had expected before the previous evening.

"And that is why the expanded trade routes need more than just a few watch towers, as initially proposed," Zhen Yi said, gesturing expansively.

"Providing more than watchtowers would require raising taxes on the settlements, outweighing the benefits of accessing the trade routes," Mobei-Jun replied.

"But surely," Zhen Yi wheedled, cervid eyes angled coyly, "the eventual income would *more* than make up for it!"

A courtier from the North snorted. "Hmph. If that's his idea of an effective argument, no wonder he wound up on the wrong side of Mobei-Jun's temper last night."

Her companion tittered.

Fury swept over Zhen Yi's face, and he glowered at the offender before schooling his features into a placid expression.

Mobei-Jun eyed him, noting the furrow that lingered between his carefully shaped brows. "The plan could be revisited in a few years if"—he emphasized the word—"the eventual income proves sufficient to cover the additional expense."

Clan elders from both sides voiced their approval, but Zhen Yi looked like he wished to argue and shot a glare towards Linguang-Jun, who watched impassively. Mobei-Jun frowned at the display.

A couple of hours and several similar exchanges later, the meeting ended. Dismissed, Zhen Yi barely acknowledged the plan to meet for a tour of the ice gardens that afternoon before storming away.

Mobei-Jun sighed as a headache threatened to build.

When he arrived in the gardens later, Zhen Yi was already there, looking around with a delighted expression. He greeted Mobei-Jun with a bright smile, at odds with the scowl he wore when they parted in the morning.

"It's beautiful! Are they all really made from ice?" He spun on the spot trying to see as much of the gardens as he could at once.

Watching him made Mobei-Jun dizzy. "Most of it." Catching a metallic scent in the air, he wrinkled his nose. "You smell of blood."

Zhen Yi started and laughed slightly. "I tripped earlier and cut my knee. Must not have cleaned it very well in my hurry to be on time!" Avoiding Mobei-Jun's gaze, he

laughed again. "Oh look!" he said, pointing at a pale blue bird with dainty tufted horns as it landed in a crystalline tree. "A horned ice sparrow! Is it true they bond for life?"

"They do," Mobei-Jun answered, frowning at the obvious attempt to change the subject, the scent of blood in the air far too strong for a skinned knee.

"That must be nice, having someone to always return to, don't you think?" Zhen Yi sighed as he watched a second bird circle the tree, calling to its mate in a high, clear whistle.

Remembering his earlier unease at seeing Zhen Yi in the consort's throne instead of the love he had lost, Mobei-Jun privately agreed. Unwilling to share as much, he said, "I have never given it much thought."

A brief look of hurt crossed Zhen Yi's face before he said, "No, I don't suppose you would have, my king."

"Why do you call me that? I am not your king."

"No," Zhen Yi said with a tilt of his head, "but you will be."

Memories of a similar conversation years before brought Mobei-Jun to a faltering stop. He remembered the feeling of warm hands carefully bandaging his injuries, dark brown human eyes filled with affection as Shang Qinghua gave the same response, completely comfortable in the circle of his embrace. And again, flushed and nervous as he first showed him the embroidered ribbon now wrapped around his wrist. "Do not call me that," he said, abruptly starting down the path.

Scrambling to keep up, Zhen Yi asked, "What should I call you instead?"

"I don't care what you call me, but you are not to call me 'my king' again."

Unlike in court when faced with opposition, Zhen Yi shrank from his displeasure as though trying to make himself smaller. A flash of emotion Mobei-Jun couldn't identify crossed his face before he quietly conceded. For the rest of the walk he remained pensive, only commenting briefly on things that caught his attention.

Haunted by memories he tried to keep locked away, Mobei-Jun made only the barest attempt at conversation before they parted, and he returned to his rooms to spend the evening in bittersweet reflection.

Two more days passed similarly, with court negotiations in the morning followed by tea or dinner together in the evening. Zhen Yi seemed so different at each meeting that Mobei-Jun struggled to understand him. The day of the wedding brought him no clarity. He supposed it hardly mattered as he faced the processional with his soon-to-be husband trembling beside him, judging from the susurration of heavy silks. With a small, callused hand held in his, he and Zhen Yi began the long walk to the temple.

Traditionally, the public processional for northern royal weddings guaranteed two things. First, that a wedding would actually occur. Second, that the consort's clan had a fair opportunity to intercede, should they be able to make it past the guards and the king or queen. The Golden Hart clan showed no such inclination as they passed. One member was in deep conversation with Linguang-Jun, but Mobei-Jun paid it no mind, distracted as he was by the

muttering from the man beside him.

Zhen Yi paused at the cry of a horned ice sparrow, a soft sigh carrying from under the veil. "Ah, little sparrow," he whispered wistfully, "you're so lucky. *You* could never be the wrong match."

"What?"

"Nothing! I was simply thinking about true love, my king." He flinched and added, "Sorry! I know you said not to call you that."

Mobei-Jun said nothing, and Zhen Yi seemed to shrink even more in response, with his anxiousness clearly rising the closer they got to the frost-covered bridge leading to the temple's doors.

"Footbridge, please don't break! I'm not the true consort!" Zhen Yi tensed as he stepped fully onto the bridge. When nothing happened, he exhaled shakily.

"What did you say?" Mobei-Jun knew he should halt the procession and demand an explanation, but a familiar cadence in Zhen Yi's voice stayed his hand. Whether it was wishful thinking or something else, he dared not guess.

Zhen Yi jumped, his hand nearly slipping from Mobei-Jun's grip. "Nothing! I was only talking to myself, I swear!"

Mobei-Jun scoffed and tightened his hold on his hand. "Let's get this over with."

"Right." Trembling more than ever, Zhen Yi followed him into the temple where the clan elders waited for them.

The ceremony passed in a blur, the only hitch coming when Zhen Yi hesitated during the ritual blood joining. "But I—" He looked from the chalice, to Mobei-Jun, to his own hands frantically, before yelping at an angry gesture from one of his own clan

members. In his haste to comply, he sliced his hand too deeply; the trickle of blood staining the binding cords only began to slow as the ceremony ended.

They emerged from the temple to polite approval from the cluster of nobles not deemed important enough to be permitted to view the ceremony. Though Zhen Yi had stopped shaking at some point, he remained skittish, with his gaze flitting over the crowd as though searching for someone.

"What now?" he murmured, his injured hand wrapped tightly in his flowing sleeve.

"The celebratory feasts and competitions, usually."

"Yes, right! I remember!" Zhen Yi babbled, gesturing expansively with his hands. Catching sight of his mangled palm, he winced. "I should take care of that before the feast."

Mobei-Jun watched him with narrowed eyes. Zhen Yi didn't look like someone who just made a highly coveted match. He looked defeated. Small. Something in his bearing worried Mobei-Jun, as though if

he let him leave, he would lose something important, perhaps forever. "Wait."

"Yes?" Zhen Yi froze as Mobei-Jun lifted his veil.

"Here." Mobei-Jun replaced one of the gaudy golden earrings Zhen Yi wore with one of his own—a silver snowflake set with opalescent gems from centuries of condensed ice, created by each successive ruler. As each one passed their ascension trials, the gems attuned to their powers. Such treasures were frequently offered as courting gifts, a promise of protection as well as a show of power.

"What are you—it's cold!" Zhen Yi said, touching the token tentatively.

Mobei-Jun nodded in satisfaction as the power imbued in the gems settled over his consort, who stared at him with startled—almost human—eyes. "Go. Attend to your hand before the feast."

"My hand?" Zhen Yi, expression wry, let go of the earring. "Of course." He bowed deeply before turning to leave. "Goodbye, my king." He was quickly joined by the clan member whose angry gesture was the cause



of his injury, and he curled in on himself as he was scolded.

As Mobei-Jun's advisors led him off, he watched Zhen Yi leave with the feeling of trying to solve a puzzle without all of the pieces.

Shang Qinghua-called the lost consort by many, though he didn't know it-never meant or wanted to deceive Mobei-Jun. When Linguang-Jun announced his travel arrangements for Mobei-Jun's wedding, Shang Qinghua's pleas to be left behind went unheard. With nowhere else to go and nothing to his name, he had been in no position to argue.

When his plan to hide in the servant's quarters, safe from encountering the demon king and the associated painful memories failed, he hoped to simply escape with his life, unnoticed amidst the chaos of the wedding activities. What was one pathetic human servant compared to the excitement of a highly anticipated demon wedding?

Luck, it turned out, was not on his side.

"And where might you be going, little rat?" Linguang-Jun stepped out of the shadows, blocking his path.

"Leaving. You said if today went well, that my debt would be repaid. That I could go," Shang Qinghua replied, backing away slowly.

Another pair of hands grabbed his arms painfully, stopping him in his tracks. "And who said today was over, hmm?" Zhen Yi purred.

"Shouldn't you be at the feast?" Shang Qinghua snapped, trying to break free.

"I retired early," he replied with an unpleasant smile, "to prepare for the rest of the evening."

Bile rose in Shang Qinghua's throat. "How could you?" he hissed. "How could you agree to marry him, and act like you're such a dutiful spouse, all while you're actually planning to kill him?!"

"Why, it almost sounds like you still have feelings for him." Zhen Yi laughed.

Shang Qinghua said nothing and glared at him.

Linguang-Jun smiled nastily as he stalked closer. "It wounds me that after all this time, after all I have done for you—saving you from that wreck, providing food and clothing, sheltering you—you would show my nephew such unwavering loyalty." He pulled a familiar-looking bundle of parchment from his pocket. "After he abandoned you without a word, you still went out of your way to try to warn him."

Shang Qinghua's blood ran cold. "I don't know what you're talking about." His grip on his satchel slipped as his palms grew clammy.

"Come now. Do you really think I would fail to have a servant in your circumstances watched?" Linguang-Jun riffled through the pages while Zhen Yi watched, his grip on Shang Qinghua's arms turned bruising. "I'm almost impressed. Had I known you were this skilled at espionage, I might have made use of you sooner." In a moment, the carefully compiled bundle of papers burst into tiny shards of ice, leaving stinging cuts across Shang Qinghua's face before Linguang-Jun gripped it in one hand, claws digging painfully into his cheeks.

"Unfortunately for you, you've already served your purpose." His grip tightened. "I never said *how* you would be allowed to leave, after all."

Ice burned through Shang Qinghua's veins, and he cried out, too afraid to notice the gentle thrum from the earring dangling in his ear.

"Cry all you like." Zhen Yi grinned. "No one will come for you."

"Just imagine the look on my dear nephew's face when I tell him you were the traitor all along. Over your corpse, of course," Linguang-Jun said as though he were merely commenting on the weather.

The ice crept up Shang Qinghua's throat, choking him as he sobbed, "My king!"

The deepening shadows grew darker still as Mobei-Jun stepped through. "What are you doing, Uncle?" He frowned at the tableau in front of him. "Shang Qinghua?" he asked, his eyes narrowing and his heart beating painfully in his chest as he saw him.

"Quite the shock, isn't it, Nephew?" Linguang-Jun said. "I had hoped to spare you this, but I found this one sneaking around your study. You remember how I suspected there was a traitor in the palace?"

"N-No! My king, you cannot trust them! This whole thing was part of a plan to overthrow you—ah!"

Linguang-Jun let the frost grow thicker. "You see? He admits it freely."

"No! That's not what I—you planned this! You and Zhen Yi! I can prove it!" Blood trickled down Shang Qinghua's chin as he forced the words past the ice in his throat.

Zhen Yi snorted. "I should like to see you try to level such accusations in front of the

court!"

"I know I'm weak and plain and a coward, but my king, I would *never* betray you! I swear on my life!" Shang Qinghua cried, desperately writhing to free himself from the vice of Linguang-Jun's grip. Tears fell down his cheeks as he stared at Mobei-Jun.

Mobei-Jun growled. Weak? Plain? Who put such thoughts in Shang Qinghua's head, when he was the one who rescued *him* so many years ago?

Ah, little sparrow, you're so lucky! You could never be the wrong match. He stared at Shang Qinghua, remembering the words his husband said as they walked to the temple. Footbridge, please don't break! I'm not the true consort!

"Release him, Uncle."

"You would trust the word of that little rat over the word of your own husband?" Zhen Yi snapped. "Have you no care at all for the offense done to me and my honour?"

"I would hear what he has to say before passing judgement," Mobei-Jun replied, turning a cool gaze on him. "If it is as you say, then it can do no harm."

"Fine," Linguang-Jun snapped, throwing Shang Qinhua to the ground. "This is foolish, even for you."

Shang Qinghua stayed where he landed, blinking away the dark spots swimming in his vision. "Thank you, my king! Thank you!"

"Explain," Mobei-Jun demanded. The ache in his chest fueled the burning need to understand why, after so long, Shang Qinghua was there, with his uncle of all people.

Shang Qinghua ducked his head and

shivered. "Well, I, uh, I've been working for your uncle for a few years, and started noticing discrepancies in his ledgers around the time talk of a wedding began." He sighed softly and slouched. "Payments I couldn't find origins for, large ones mostly. But nothing he took with him when travelling would have brought in anywhere near the amount of the deposits."

"Aside from the ludicrous notion that I would trust a *human* with my accounts, none of what he's said proves anything. Can't you see the worm is just trying to save his own skin?"

"Enough, Uncle." Mobei-Jun turned his glare back on Shang Qinghua, who cowered, and added, "Continue."

"Right. I only figured it out recently, when I found some letters between your uncle and Zhen Yi while unpacking his things. They contained details about the transactions, and laid out plans to-to kill you. Tonight."

"Wretch! How dare you?" Zhen Yi shrieked and kicked him.

"Those are damning words, indeed. But they are just words, not proof," Linguang-Jun sneered. "Clearly his desperation has fueled his imagination to conjure such a plot."

Shang Qinghua straightened and cried, "No! I have proof! I made copies! I put one in your study, but Linguang-Jun found it. I have another one—here! Please!" He began fishing in a voluminous sleeve when several things happened at once.

Zhen Yi darted forward with a snarl at the same time Linguang-Jun attempted to seize Shang Qinghua. He tried to avoid both of them, but succeeded only in falling to the floor on his shoulder. He kicked out, and darkness filled the corridor as the lantern

he brought fell and went out.

Sounds of scuffling and the metallic scent of blood filled the air before Mobei-Jun could disperse the shadows and summon light enough to see.

His uncle stood before him, scratches on his cheek, and beside him stood Shang Qinghua and—another Shang Qinghua, both in elaborate wedding robes. Satisfaction curled down his spine, as the pieces fell into place. The differences in personality, even the different feel of "Zhen Yi's" hand at their many different meetings, were because he had been meeting two different people. Nostalgia hadn't caused him to imagine similarities to Shang Qinghua; it *had* been him, at least some of the time. "Qinghua."

Two identical voices answered him.

"I am in no mood for games."

Linguang-Jun, a handkerchief pressed to his cheek, said, "What game, Nephew? Surely you can tell which is your snivelling little pet."

He studied the others for a moment. The pull of his own magic only coursed towards one of them, but he couldn't rely on the earring alone. His history with Shang Qinghua was well-known, so he couldn't rely on knowledge of that, either. Keeping his uncle in his periphery, he asked, "On our way to the temple, what did you say to the sparrow?"

The Shang Qinghua to his left blinked large dark eyes at him and stammered, "I don't remember!"

The one to his right fidgeted and looked at him with something like panic. "I don't know!"

He hummed. "Then, what did you say to

the bridge?"

"I really don't remember, my king!" the one on the left repeated.

"And you?" he asked the one on the right.

"I-I don't know." He refused to meet Mobei-Jun's gaze, though his cheeks were flushed.

Mobei-Jun listed towards him. Quick as a flash, before he could step any closer, the other snarled and leapt at his double, a knife in hand.

"You should have minded your own business!" he cried, brandishing the knife in an arc directly aimed at his heart.

Mobei-Jun moved instinctively, pushing Shang Qinghua behind him and summoning a spear of ice in the same moment. As the spear struck home, blood splattered the floor and the wall opposite.

He watched as the glamours slid away. Zhen Yi slumped over the ice protruding from his middle while Shang Qinghua stared, wide-eyed and shaking.

"Qinghua."

"My king?" he said, meeting his gaze. His expression changed, turning fierce as he cried, "Look out!" He grabbed Mobei-Jun's cloak in an attempt to pull him away from his uncle, who had turned a blade of his own on him.

A burst of ice froze Linguang-Jun in place. "That was sloppy for you, Uncle. I'm surprised."

He snarled, "You're weak, Mobei. You don't deserve the throne!"

"Guards!" Mobei-Jun called, sending out a summons of ice flurries for good measure as he wrapped an arm around Shang Qinghua's waist.

"I will destroy you, the way I should have destroyed your father years ago! And you!" Linguang-Jun glared at Shang Qinghua as the palace guards wrested his arms behind him and clasped him in chains. "If you think you can escape retribution for this because my nephew has given you his protection, you are sorely mistaken!"

"Enough, Uncle! You will be tried and punished for treason, for tonight's actions, and many others too, I am sure," Mobei-Jun announced. To the guards, who stood to attention at being addressed, he said, "Escort my uncle to the dungeons. And send someone to alert the Golden Hart clan that their representative's scheming failed. No doubt, they will want to collect what remains."

The echoes of Linguang-Jun's threats faded in the now empty corridor as the guards led him to the dungeons. Mobei-Jun's side was warm where Shang Qinghua leaned against him, rubbing his neck. When he whimpered, Mobei-Jun pulled him closer, allowing him to hide his face in the fur mantle draped over his shoulders. He ran a gentle hand down his back as though soothing a frightened animal.

"You are injured," he murmured. "Come, I'll send for the healer."

Shang Qinghua tried to follow, but his knees buckled at the first steps, and he babbled apologies as Mobei-Jun lifted him into his arms. "I'm alright! Please, don't trouble yourself on my account!"

Mobei-Jun ignored him, content to have finally caught his elusive quarry. "Hush," he said as Shang Qinghua's rambling became pleading.



Shang Qinghua fiddled with the fur over Mobei-Jun's shoulders. "Of course, I understand. This must all be rather surprising, I suppose." He added quietly, "Your uncle and your husband just tried to kill you for the throne. I'm so sorry."

"He is not my husband," Mobei-Jun replied, stalking towards the royal quarters. "Hold on properly. I don't want to drop you."

"Right! Of course! Forget I ever said anything about it!" Shang Qinghua complied and tentatively wrapped his arms loosely around Mobei-Jun's neck.

Still dissatisfied with Shang Qinghua's hold, Mobei-Jun growled and hefted him even closer, until he had little choice but to cling to him, his brow pressed against the crook of his neck. Lulled by the steady sound of Mobei-Jun's heartbeat, he soon fell into a doze.

Mobei-Jun broke the silence after stepping through the shadows to his chambers. "In the gardens, that was you."

"Y-Yes." Shang Qinghua jerked awake and tensed as he took in the change in his surroundings.

"You smelled of blood."

"Zhen Yi was displeased with the treaty negotiations that morning."

Mobei-Jun growled, the sound a harsh contrast to how gently he set Shang Qinghua down on his bed. "A courtier mentioned we argued at dinner the night before. I assume that was also you."

"Yes, my king."

"And today...why?"

"Huh?"

"Why the subterfuge? Why not come to me as yourself?"

"They threatened to kill me if I didn't! I didn't want to! I never wanted to come in the first place!"

Mobei-Jun's flinch would have been imperceptible to anyone who didn't know him as well as Shang Qinghua, but a knock at the door prevented his reply.

"What?" he snarled, whirling to face the door.

The healer bowed in the doorway. "Forgive my intrusion. I was told my skills were needed?"

Mobei-Jun nodded, and under his watchful eye, the healer determined that with proper rest and medication, Shang Qinghua would recover quickly enough from the spidery white ice burns sprawled over his throat and the welts criss-crossing his back. Seeing proof of Shang Qinghua's choice to protect him when given the chance to do otherwise, despite years apart, asking for nothing in return, tempered his emotions.

Shang Qinghua avoided his gaze as the healer gave their recommendations and took their leave. "Thank you for your concern. I'll leave now then."

"You would leave? After so long?" Mobei-Jun's gaze caught on the earring as it flashed in the light. He inhaled deeply before continuing, "I will not force you to stay if that is what you truly wish, but I must know one thing first."

"What?"

"Why did you keep this, if being near me is so repugnant?" He brushed a finger lightly over the earring dangling from Shang Qinghua's ear. With a gasp, Shang Qinghua's hand flew up as though to hide it, meeting Mobei-Jun's wrist instead. "Please, don't ask me. Anything else I'll gladly answer, but that...I can't."

"I wish to hear it, Shang Qinghua."

Sighing in defeat—really, he never could say no to this spoiled demon—Shang Qinghua muttered, "He didn't deserve it! He wasn't paying attention enough to notice I didn't take it off. Why should he have been allowed to have it when he didn't—when I still—he was plotting your assassination!" He clapped his hands over his mouth and flushed.

Mobei-Jun leaned closer, eyes narrowing. "When you still what, Qinghua?"

He shook his head. "Please," he pleaded, still muffled by his hands, "don't."

Gently, Mobei-Jun pulled his hands away from his face. "Why have you stayed away for so long? Why not return after the ambush?"

"What? And burden you with a consort you didn't want?" Shang Qinghua said bitterly. Before Mobei-Jun could reply, he added, "I wrote you so many letters, but you never came. I understand, really."

"No, you don't," Mobei-Jun replied, his grip on his hands tightening. The ribbon, normally so carefully wound around his wrist, loosened, brushing the back of Shang Qinghua's hand. He began to pull away to adjust it, to keep it close as he had become used to when Shang Qinghua gasped.

He held the silk gently, running a finger over the worn embroidery. "This is... You..." He drew a shaky breath and said simply, "I never thought to see this again. All this time, you've kept it."

"Now do you understand?"

"I think I do."

"Had I received any letter, had I been able to find you, I would have brought you here in a moment."

Shang Qinghua's eyes widened. "Then, truly, you didn't receive them?"

"Not even one."

"I might have known he lied."

"My uncle."

"Mm. I woke up in his estate after the attack. At first, he said you were looking for the culprits, but as time went on, you didn't come. I had nowhere else to go, so I just...stayed. Hoping you might come. Eventually."

"And he told me he hadn't seen you. That you were either dead or had run away." Mobei-Jun pulled Shang Qinghua closer.

"Never. I could never willingly leave you."

"But you were leaving."

"You were marrying someone else."

"There were rumours of a rebellion, according to my uncle. I couldn't allow my country to fall victim to them, though I suspected his hand in it. I had no proof."

"Oh! This might help." Shang Qinghua jerked upright and fished out the copy of incriminating documents.

Mobei-Jun set it aside after a cursory glance.

"You aren't going to read it? I worked hard on that, you know!"

"I'll show it to the elders tomorrow."

"Hmm. They aren't going to be pleased that you killed your consort." Shang Qinghua frowned.

"Have I?" Mobei-Jun leaned closer, a predatory gleam in his eyes.

"I'm fairly certain Zhen Yi was quite dead," Shang Qinghua squeaked, nearly falling back on the bed as he leaned away.

"He is not my consort."

"But the treaty-"

"Was voided when *he* failed to attend the ceremony." Mobei-Jun cupped a hand to his bruised cheek. "So tell me, Shang Qinghua, who *is* my true consort?"

Leaning in, Shang Qinghua murmured, "I don't think the court will count that."

"Then we will hold another ceremony, where I shall be at your side the entire time," Mobei-Jun replied, before pressing his lips to Shang Qinghua's.

With a sigh, Shang Qinghua melted against him. "My king, my king." He pulled away. "Wait...you said not to call you that."

"It's alright."

"Did you say that because of me?"

As Mobei-Jun turned away, the tips of his ears darkened. "The healer said you needed rest."

Lips curved in a smile, Shang Qinghua kissed his cheek. "Okay, my king. If you'll stay with me."

More than willing to comply now that they had been reunited, Mobei-Jun pulled him into his arms and curled protectively around him. There was much to do, with Linguang-Jun and Zhen Yi's treachery discovered, but they could address that in the morning. They had a lifetime together, after all.

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On learning the extent of Linguang-Jun's crimes, the clan elders unanimously accepted Shang Qinghua as the true Northern Consort, worried Mobei-Jun would refuse any other. Linguang-Jun was stripped of his title and exiled to the south, his powers bound, barring any access to the Northern palace and strongholds.

Shang Qinghua's cleverness saved the trade agreement with the Golden Hart clan. Seemingly unaware of Zhen Yi's plans with Linguang-Jun, they happily accepted the offered trade agreement when he explained it in front of the court. He almost felt pity for how quickly they forgot Zhen Yi in their eagerness to accept. Almost. The clan even accepted the invitation to stay for the wedding as a sign of the truce.

Mobei-Jun's wedding to his lost consort was widely celebrated. Some of the excitement came from the wildly embellished stories spreading like wildfire across the realm, about assassinations and wicked uncles and, most importantly, the perseverance of true love.

Cheers met the happy couple as they exited the temple for a second time. Mobei-Jun admired the way his husband shone, not because of the shining headdress he wore or the silver threads woven into his robes, but because of his bright smile and natural warmth.

When Shang Qinghua turned to beam up at him, he couldn't help but kiss him. The

crowd's cheers grew louder still when he swept him into his arms.

Shang Qinghua whined and covered his face, "My king, please!"

"Listen," Mobei-Jun murmured. "Does it sound like they disapprove? They're cheering for you."

Nestling happily in his embrace, Shang Qinghua cupped his husband's face between his hands and pressed their foreheads together. "No," he sighed, "they're cheering for *us*."



THE SONG OF THE NICHTINGALE

Rating:

Teen and Up

Relationships

Mobei-Jun / Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua

Tags

Falling in love; Near death experiences; Happy ending; Hurt/comfort

Summary

"I remember a boy, telling the story of someone who shared the same name as the emperor."

Shang Qinghua's lips twitched again, but Mobei-Jun could see his smile in the way he moved rather than the shifting of his mouth. He turned towards Mobei-Jun, just slightly, but kept his distance. Though with each passing moment, he seemed to push farther and farther along those bounds. Closer and closer he swayed, and Mobei-Jun was impatient for it. "I believe back then it would have been a little prince."

Movie Jun bent low, letting his voice taper off so as to not be heard by others. "Be careful, Qinghua. That little prince is an emperor now, and disrespect is not to be tolerated."

Shang Qinghua's eyes flashed with something indistinguishable, just briefly. "Disrespect," he repeated, sounding breathless, as if it'd taken all of his courage to lift his hand. "My little prince," he continued gently, fingers still brushing against Mobei-Jun's cheek. "My prince, I say it with devotion."

Author:

HAYSEL

Illustrated by:

BANAPOT

Mobei-Jun slipped further into the forest. He kept his footsteps light as he lifted his robes in the attempt of not dirtying them as he moved across the ground. He let his robes drop from his hands as he moved onto a gentle path.

He came upon a well not long after finding the road. He walked to it, feet feeling tired and unused to a long walk on uneven ground. He sat against the ledge and peered down at the black water rippling in the low light.

"Who are you?"

Mobei-Jun looked up.

A boy, seemingly a few years older than him, was standing a few feet away, a bucket in his hands. Mobei-Jun didn't answer, but he did feel apprehensive. He stood up carefully, trying not to move too quickly.

The boy set down the bucket. "It's alright, I'm not upset."

Mobei-Jun stared at him.

The boy took a few steps closer, and Mobei-Jun assessed his movements. "What's your name?"

"Mobei-Jun," he responded, watching for the boy's reaction.

For a moment, the boy's face was impassive. Then, he smiled and he moved to sit on the well, too. He looked up at Mobei-Jun and patted the stone for Mobei-Jun to sit beside him. "That name sure does sound familiar. In fact, I think I know of a little prince who goes by that name. I've heard many stories about him."

Mobei-Jun sat back down beside him carefully. He leaned onto the stone and looked the boy in the eye. "Tell me."

Mobei-Jun was not unaware of their ire, and he was not unaware of their attempts to teach him more than he already knew. They wanted him to be a genius—to know as much as them, and then to learn even more. There was a part of him that could appreciate the sentiment, for if anyone were to be the smartest, it should be him.

Even still, Mobei-Jun was uninterested. Those things held no use for him. Perhaps his officials and trusted advisors wanted him to be interested, and perhaps even their reasoning for it was for Mobei-Jun's benefit. But during the moments he thought on it, and when he considered what he could reap from time spent on frivolous things, he determined that their desire for these things was just as frivolous.

However, he eventually began receiving letters. He'd always received letters throughout his reign. It was not new to be in correspondence with neighboring and allying countries, but they all began to house a specific theme.

- —the author under your power.
- —there was a story I enjoyed from your region.
- —words as though they came off the pages themselves.

Mobei-Jun became curious after being asked for the fourth time to meet this mysterious author. None of those letters ever said their name. Mobei-Jun found himself intrigued—all of these individuals seemed to be under the impression that Mobei-Jun would know.

He asked one of his advisors the morning after he'd received that fourth letter asking to meet the author. His advisor seemed to know immediately what he was talking about.

"The works are anonymous," they'd said.

Mobei-Jun had acknowledged this. He then ordered for the person to be found regardless. Many of his advisors were eager to complete the task.

While they searched, Mobei-Jun read.

When he had time to himself in the evening, instead of lingering at dinner, he retired to his chambers. He did not allow any servants with him, denying them as he did every night, and remained to himself.

He prepared for bed, and as he prepared, he often thought of what he'd read the night before. It wasn't so much that what had been written was offering some sort of knowledge he'd never had before, but that it'd stated, in different words, things Mobei-Jun had already known. It stated things that he hadn't *known* he'd already known. It was new in its familiarity.

All else was overcast by his greed. He wanted more of it. Every night he read, and then he read again. He reread, and he studied, and he found himself lying awake at night, staring at the ceiling and wondering why there were so many new thoughts to be had about works he'd read dozens of times.

He stared at his ceiling and wondered why the more he thought of it, the more those turns of phrase sounded familiar. He'd read them so many times that it was quite possibly a concoction of his own desire to feel as though he knew as much about the author as the author seemed to know about him. Mobei-Jun could not shake the feeling—he knew those words.

Mobei-Jun entered the hall late. He waited

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until the writer was in the room before arriving.

The anticipation had eaten him alive. He had shut his eyes and he had attempted to sleep, but it evaded him. He remembered drifting, but each time, his mind took him to the following morning, and by the time the sun actually had risen, Mobei-Jun had felt like he'd lived the day a thousand times.

Everything was buzzing in his head, and he felt nervous. It was a terrible realization, and he could acknowledge that it was why he did not want to be sitting and waiting for the author. He could not sit with the sparks in his veins.

His advisors had told him that the author's name was Shang Qinghua. They'd found him when one of the servants in the palace had heard of the search. She had shared with them that she had a suspicion that the author of those stories was perhaps a young man who lived on the outskirts of the village at the bottom of the mountain. There, in the shallow depths of the woods, was a man who told stories to children who stopped at his well.

When Mobei-Jun had been told this, he remembered a well in a forest, and a boy who wove gold through the air like he was sewing Mobei-Jun into the wind.

Eventually, Mobei-Jun found his hand on the door, and it opened beneath his fingers, like he wasn't the one moving it to begin with. It was as though one moment the door was shut, and the next, the door was open. When he saw Shang Qinghua, he did not freeze. Instead, he felt pulled forward, as if by those same golden threads used to create him. Shang Qinghua was looking at him, silent and unmoving in his spot near the other end of the room.

Shang Qinghua wore dark clothes, but they

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were still rich with color. When he tilted his head in greeting, and the candle light caught just right on his face, it was like his eyes glowed with a golden hue. Mobei-Jun allowed him to bow, solely for the sight of that shimmer when he lifted back up and the soft flames in the room were captured by his irises.

"Huangshang," Shang Qinghua said. His movements and his voice and his words were all things becoming of a subject meeting their emperor. Yet even still it was as though he was calling Mobei-Jun's name, enticing him like a siren.

"Shang Qinghua," Mobei-Jun said.

Shang Qinghua's lips softened, not quite a smile, but pleasantly warm all the same. "It is my honor to be in your presence."

Mobei-Jun did not move from where he stood, though he could have sat whenever he wished. "I will allow that," Mobei-Jun said, hardly aware of the words coming out of his mouth. "Only if it is not because I am the emperor."

Shang Qinghua smiled that time, a quirk of his gentle lips. His eyes were glittering with the low flames, rich and warm. They were pools of darkness, but the kind of darkness that only came when something spent too much time in the light. "I assure you it is not that."

"Then that is acceptable."

Shang Qinghua's smile widened, and he turned to glance around the hall. He took in the decorated windows and pillars, eyes lingering on the extravagant decor. There were others in the room. The servants lingered, and two of Mobei-Jun's advisors stood to the side, watching the exchange. Shang Qinghua did not acknowledge them, but it was not out of rudeness. Mobei-Jun

knew that it was from no ego to note that it was because Shang Qinghua was solely focused on him.

"Come," Mobei-Jun said. "Sit and we may start dinner."

Mobei-Jun held out an arm as a gesture and Shang Qinghua moved forward. Mobei-Jun should have shifted out of the way to lead Shang Qinghua to his seat, but he did not. Instead, as Shang Qinghua stepped up to him like he was dancing into the circle of his arms, Mobei-Jun remained rooted to his spot on the floor. Shang Qinghua kept Mobei-Jun's gaze, and Mobei-Jun met it. He stared down at him and his arm lowered to his side.

"Huangshang," Shang Qinghua said, hardly a sound at all.

"Would you like some tea?" Mobei-Jun asked. They were close now, and he could smell the fragrance lingering on Shang Qinghua's skin.

"I would love some," Shang Qinghua said. His eyes glimmered again. "And dinner still, too."

"Then come away," Mobei-Jun murmured. "And I will give you anything you desire."

Every night, Shang Qinghua would come. He knew that as emperor, there was no possibility of a person refusing him. He knew that there was no world in which he would be denied, by anybody. And he knew that Shang Qinghua could not seek him out if he wanted to, so he would not have. This plagued his heart like a disease.

Every ounce of bitterness that crept into him when he thought of how he could never be sure if Shang Qinghua truly returned his feelings was all wiped away as if swept by honey, each time Shang Qinghua stepped into the room and met his gaze with a soft smile and warm eyes.

The days where Mobei-Jun didn't have to wait, when Shang Qinghua had come early, were always better. He preferred it, to be able to walk into the room and find Shang Qinghua waiting. At this stage, after the many nights Shang Qinghua had come, he was often left on his own, waiting for Mobei-Jun to sweep him away, whether to dinner, or to his personal wing of the palace.

Shang Qinghua was standing by the table when Mobei-Jun entered. He'd come as soon as he heard Shang Qinghua had arrived, so Shang Qinghua was left to attend to himself for only a few minutes, but was already lighting incense.

Mobei-Jun felt his lips twitch up as he laid eyes on him. He shut the door behind himself, though one of his attendants had tried to enter with him. They did not protest as the door closed in front of them.

Shang Qinghua didn't turn to Mobei-Jun when he heard the door close, but he watched the smoke rise from the burner as it swirled in the air. Mobei-Jun came to a stop beside him, and found his eyes following the incense, too, until he found it endlessly more uninteresting than the person who had lit it.

"This is your tenth visit," Mobei-Jun said.

Shang Qinghua's eyes stayed locked on the smoke. "Yes," he said. "More than I ever could have hoped for."

"Did you not think your stories were worthy of my attention?"



Shang Qinghua's expression cracked a little in amusement. "Not necessarily."

Mobei-Jun moved further into his space. "What did you expect then?"

Shang Qinghua looked pensive for a moment. "I don't know if *expect* is the right word. Hope, perhaps, is more accurate."

Mobei-Jun's voice seemed to weaken, and it was an unfamiliar bodily response. "What did you hope for?"

"This. Time with you. And maybe...that

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you'd remember." He wouldn't look at Mobei-Jun.

It was quiet in the room while Mobei-Jun soaked in the knowledge that Shang Qinghua knew him, too. He'd thought he had, but to have it confirmed was a different experience than expectation. Shang Qinghua had known him by sight, by sound, and by soul. Shang Qinghua was right, as he always was. That feeling had been hope—always hope.

"You are impossible to forget," Mobei-Jun murmured.

Shang Qinghua turned to smile at him, and the smoke seemed to curl around him like it was trying to perch on his shoulders. "Oh? Tell me what's so impossible to forget."

Mobei-Jun shifted even closer to Shang Qinghua's side. He didn't move towards Mobei-Jun, but he kept his head tilted up in his direction. "I remember a boy, telling the story of someone who shared the same name as the emperor."

Shang Qinghua's lips twitched again, but Mobei-Jun could see his smile in the way he moved rather than the shifting of his mouth. He turned towards Mobei-Jun, just slightly, but kept his distance. Though with each passing moment, he seemed to push farther and farther along those bounds. Closer and closer he swayed, and Mobei-Jun was impatient for it. "I believe back then it would have been a little prince."

Mobei-Jun bent low, letting his voice taper off so as to not be heard by others. "Be careful, Qinghua. That little prince *is* an emperor now, and disrespect is not to be tolerated."

Shang Qinghua's eyes flashed with something indistinguishable, just briefly. He reached up, fingers hesitant, but still

moving forward. He moved slowly, enough for Mobei-Jun to step away if he desired. The tips of his fingers connected with Mobei-Jun's cheekbone. Shang Qinghua's smile softened as he looked up at him, and that incense along his shoulders seemed to soften him there, too. Shang Qinghua melted into his clothes.

"Disrespect," he repeated, sounding breathless, as if it'd taken all of his courage to lift his hand. "My little prince," he continued gently, fingers still brushing against Mobei-Jun's cheek.

Mobei-Jun tipped into the touch, keeping Shang Qinghua's gaze even though his eyes wanted to close at the feeling of Shang Qinghua's skin touching his. It was euphoric, and he felt faint with it.

"My prince, I say it with devotion."

Shang Qinghua was everything. He was what Mobei-Jun thought of when he woke up, and when he laid his head down to sleep. He was the water he drank, and the food he ate, and the sun that rose every morning. With Shang Qinghua, everything had more meaning, yet also felt meaningless. Being emperor was easier when he had something to look forward to at the end of his day. But it was also harder, because he couldn't be with Shang Qinghua as often as he wished.

But he was careful not to take it for granted. Shang Qinghua was treasured in his heart, and the fortune of finding him was not lost on Mobei-Jun. He thought, sometimes, about what it would be like to lose Shang Qinghua and his visits. It made him feel physically ill to imagine it. Life was bleak

and Shang Qinghua was not. Without him, Mobei-Jun thought that he might waste away in little time.

When another author in their region had begun to grow in popularity, Mobei-Jun had been brought the man's books on a daily basis. "He's practically world-renowned already," his advisors would say to him. They were eager, similar to vultures.

Mobei-Jun had no interest. It was not his love for books that had him so enamored with Shang Qinghua, but his inherent love for Shang Qinghua that had him enamored with his books. For as Mobei-Jun considered it, he realized that's what it was and had always been. There had been a place carved out inside of him, in the shape of Shang Qinghua, and his books had only been the gateway to that part of himself.

He eventually agreed to allow the new author to come and meet him. His advisors wanted to meet him, and they wouldn't cease their requests. When Shang Qinghua heard of it, his interest had been piqued enough for Mobei-Jun to consider it. Shang Qinghua did not dare to say that he'd like to meet him in front of Mobei-Jun's advisors, but when Mobei-Jun brought him to his room that night to be alone, he'd said as much. Mobei-Jun allowed them to invite the author the following morning.

Shang Qinghua had done most of the talking. Mobei-Jun was not paying attention to what the man said. He did not bother to learn his name, and he did not remember it. Shang Qinghua seemed content to speak to him, however, and Mobei-Jun found it somewhat convenient, for it gave him time to simply look upon him and his now-familiar face.

When Mobei-Jun looked at Shang Qinghua now, he felt comfortable. Even the uncomfortable seat in the dining hall felt cozier, and the blankets on his bed felt warmer. It was all more comfortable now, even breathing air into his lungs.

The way Shang Qinghua would look back was even more beloved than the affectionate turning in his heart. Mobei-Jun could watch the way Shang Qinghua's expression softened for him over and over and still crave the sight of it. Shang Qinghua's eyes were always warm, like firelight, and his smiles were almost secret, like if the wrong person saw it, they'd have his head for it. Though Mobei-Jun would never allow something like that to happen, Shang Qinghua still smiled like that anyway, and he still didn't seem to care that some might find it indecent.

Though best of all, and what made Mobei-Jun ache when Shang Qinghua was not there, was when they would retire to his rooms. Sometimes, Shang Qinghua would read to him. Sometimes Mobei-Jun fell asleep, with the sound of Shang Qinghua's voice washing over him. Shang Qinghua found it embarrassing to read his own stories, so he read other's instead. Mobei-Jun found that they were all the more bearable when read in Shang Qinghua's low tone.

Though Mobei-Jun would like to remain asleep, and for Shang Qinghua to remain with him and rest as well, he knew that as things were, it was best for Mobei-Jun to be the one to escort Shang Qinghua out each night. There could be no confusion that Shang Qinghua was allowed this, and that Mobei-Jun desired it. He desired Shang Qinghua's hand, gentle, as he placed it on Mobei-Jun's shoulder. There were his fingers, drifting slowly up, able to be stopped if Mobei-Jun wished, as they drew up over his throat. There was Shang Qinghua's soft exhale of breath, every time, as if shocked at the allowance. Then his hand, on Mobei-Jun's face, holding him, as he whispered

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that it was time to wake.

Mobei-Jun would look up, blink his eyes open, and Shang Qinghua would hover just above him, and every time this happened, he was closer than the last. Shang Qinghua would lean near, the dark candlelight dotting Shang Qinghua's eyes like stars while his lips turned up with pleasure. His fingers stroked over Mobei-Jun's cheek.

"Are you awake, dear one?" He asked, voice soft and hardly loud enough to be heard by anybody standing even a few feet away.

Mobei-Jun didn't want to say yes. He wanted to feign sleep, to look upon him for as long as he wished without having to stop. Every time Shang Qinghua parted, it was like parting with himself.

Shang Qinghua seemed to read this on Mobei-Jun's face. Or perhaps he just knew that Mobei-Jun wanted him to stay. The smile on his lips turned even sweeter. "It's time for me to go."

"Don't leave," Mobei-Jun murmured.

Shang Qinghua blinked slow, and his fingers combed through Mobei-Jun's hair, close to his scalp. "I must," he said, "though I could sit with you forever and never tire of it."

"Qinghua," Mobei-Jun said as he brought his own hand up. He brushed the back of his fingers over Shang Qinghua's cheek. He tucked a stray lock of hair behind Shang Qinghua's ear. "I do not wish for you to go."

Shang Qinghua was so close that Mobei-Jun could feel his breath on his face. Shang Qinghua stroked his hair. "Have I ever told you the story of the emperor who fell in love with a songbird?"

"No." His voice was weak.

Shang Qinghua hovered closer, and there was the faintest feeling of his lips brushing over Mobei-Jun's. "I'll tell it to you tomorrow. Wait for it then. I'll tell you of the songbird, too, and how it loved the emperor just as much."

Without Shang Qinghua, everything was bleak. Mobei-Jun thought the air must have changed the first night Shang Qinghua did not come to him. He'd waited for that story, the story of the songbird and the emperor, but Shang Qinghua had not come. And he did not return the day following, or the one after that.

Mobei-Jun asked his advisors where he was and if he was alright. "He was fine," they'd say, and that perhaps he was just busy. They told him that he was likely writing a new book, and perhaps he needed time to finish it. Mobei-Jun felt that this was possible, given that he'd taken up all of Shang Qinghua's time the past several months. When he thought of this, he felt guilty. He had not wished to stifle him.

Day by passing day, he considered perhaps offering a place in the palace for Shang Qinghua to write. Maybe he could write in the gardens, or in the library, or in a small room kept to himself. Mobei-Jun would not mind either way. He only wished that Shang Qinghua would have everything he needed, and he wished that he himself was one of those things.

Mobei-Jun could not focus. He could not think clearly. Every day he hoped Shang Qinghua would come. He was meant to be invited, every night, as he'd always been, and it would be ill-advised for his servants not to do it. To go against the emperor's wishes was not to be taken lightly. But even still, Shang Qinghua did not come.

The realization that Shang Qinghua perhaps did not want to come had dawned on Mobei-Jun like an everlasting morning, where the sun was perpetually stuck half up on the horizon. It was not black like night, for Mobei-Jun had seen, and he knew now the taste of life with Shang Qinghua. He could smell it, could feel it, just out of reach. But the long shadows that melted from the trees as that sun did not rise was ever-present and ever-heavy.

The doctors came, and they determined that he had a low-fever, one that would burn away within a few days if he was taken care of. His servants were prudent, bringing him food and water frequently enough that they could have taken care of a platoon of men. Mobei-Jun would not accept it. He hardly had enough energy to lift his arms or open his eyes.

Time passed aimlessly, and the doctors came again, and were grave in their determination that if Mobei-Jun did not get better within the next day, there was little hope for his recovery at all. His servants and his advisors were horrified. He was young, and he was healthy. They had not begun to even prepare another emperor when he'd had such time stretched out before him. They scrambled to find someone to replace him, while also trying to heal him.

Mobei-Jun found that he could only think of one thing—did Shang Qinghua know? And if he did, would he care? He found that thinking about it hurt, and hurting ached something terrible within him now. He elected to think no longer. All he had left was sleep.

It was quiet in his room. Shang Qinghua could hear the wind rustling the leaves outside the window, and could hear the gentle sound of an artificial stream out in the gardens mere inches from Mobei-Jun's chambers. Mobei-Jun had always been quiet, just like his halls, but Shang Qinghua had never heard it this quiet. Though perhaps before, it had been filled with other things that made the space more welcoming. Now, it was like a tomb.

Shang Qinghua looked at him for a moment, taking in the sight of his pale face, his cheekbones, and the way his hair splayed out on the bed and the small pillow. He looked as though he'd already been dressed for a funeral. He was lying like a precious jewel in a box, peaceful and cold.

He reached out with one hand before his feet moved. A moment later, he was on his knees beside Mobei-Jun. His hand moved over Mobei-Jun's arm and up to his shoulder. His skin was cool, and it was noticeable even through his dark robe. Shang Qinghua let his hand trail up and press to Mobei Jun's face as he leaned over him. He hovered close, hoping the warmth of his hand and the heat of his breath would soak into Mobei-Jun and heal him from his ailment.

"Dawang," he whispered, letting his hand flit up to his cheek. His thumb swept over his skin. "My king, are you awake?"

Mobei-Jun's breath blew shallowly out of his nose.

Shang Qinghua nudged into his cheek. "Please don't do this to me," he murmured. "You can keep me from the palace, and have all the storytellers and songbirds you

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desire. You could cage me out of your sight forever. Just don't make me live in a world without you in it."

The wind seemed to blow a touch harder, and there was a gentle whistling where it sailed through the lattice.

He paused for a moment, waiting for Mobei-Jun to stir, for his eyelashes to flutter, for his breath to shift and change to that of the living. When he did none of these things, Shang Qinghua rested his face against Mobei-Jun's. He felt tears well in his eyes, a desperate pressure in his chest that seemed to expand with every passing moment.

"How cruel," Shang Qinghua said, voice lowering to hardly a whisper. Tears hung heavy on his lashes, and every flutter of his eyelids had them spilling over and landing on Mobei-Jun's cheek. "What a brutish and unjust emperor, to woo me so thoroughly—to bring me and have me fall utterly in love with you, just to send me away and then leave me on this earth alone."

Shang Qinghua blinked, and another tear dripped onto Mobei-Jun's face. Perhaps it was another delusion, the way Mobei-Jun's brow twitched, just so.

The wind grew louder for a moment, and there was a gentle knock against the soft wood of the lattice, and a light scraping over the screen. Shang Qinghua turned, and a shadow moved across the room.

Before his blood could fully cool, the door to Mobei-Jun's room slid open and light poured in to replace the soft glow of the moon. Shang Qinghua did not move. He held onto Mobei-Jun tighter. Regardless, they took him away. In the low register of his voice he begged for them to let him stay. Even still, he found himself making his way down the lonely hill, through the solitary trees, and into his unaccompanied cabin. There, he shut his door.

The water sloshed into Shang Qinghua's bucket. He stared at it from his vantage point at the mouth of the well. The water looked black, and the reflection of the sky was white from the dim gray of the clouds. He pulled the bucket up, and it clattered against the stone wall. He pulled and pulled, until he could wrap his hands around the cool, wet wood.

He heard footsteps approaching, and he felt quite tired. His head throbbed with the exhaustion, and his bones ached from his joints that seemed unable to thaw from the cold. Ever since he'd returned from Mobei-Jun's chambers, it was like every shadow held ice, and his fires held no warmth.

He heard a muffled thump from behind him, and he turned.

Mobei-Jun was lying a few paces away, his black-as-night coat pooling around him like his own well of darkness.

Shang Qinghua's mouth parted for a moment, and then the bucket was on the ground, and the bottom of his robes were stained from it. His knees felt no pain when he fell beside him. "My king," he gasped out, all air and no voice. He held onto his shoulders, and noted the same coolness that he'd had a few nights prior. "My king," he said again, louder. "My king, no. Please!"

Mobei-Jun did not move. His shoulders were limp in Shang Qinghua's grasp. His breath was hardly existent, and he was so pale. He looked like the water while it had still been in that bucket, with the reflection of the sky on its surface.

"Please," Shang Qinghua sorrowed, the sound coming from deep within his stomach. He lifted Mobei-Jun, holding him to himself. "No, my king, what are you doing out here? Why did you come?"

Mobei-Jun did not answer, for the only sound Shang Qinghua had heard from him was the sound of air making its way to and from the small breaths he had been taking. And with every passing moment, they grew slower and more shallow.

"Please, please, tell me what to do," he sobbed. "I don't know what to do." He looked down at him, one hand coming up to hold his face. It was as though he was already dead.

Shang Qinghua held him in his arms, his forehead pressed to Mobei-Jun's temple. He did not know what to do. "I've thought of that story," he whispered. "When I told you that I'd tell you it, I hadn't really thought of how to tell that story at all."

Mobei-Jun's breath was cool where it washed over Shang Qinghua's skin.

"Oh, don't do this to me," Shang Qinghua rasped. He nudged into him. "I'll come up with a story about a songbird and an emperor if it will keep you near me. Do you promise to never let me despair something the way I would despair if I were to lose you?"

Mobei-Jun's chest rose and fell with each weak pull of life.

"Alright then," he breathed. "Alright, I will tell you the story." Shang Qinghua's fingers ached where they gripped onto him. "There was once a bird," he began, voice trembling. "And its head was filled with

music. It could think of a thousand songs in a moment, and remember every note."

The wind rustled the leaves, and it cut through the trees in a low whistle. The cool air raised a chill on Shang Qinghua's shoulders, and he pulled Mobei-Jun in further to keep him warm.

"After only a short time on the earth, it began to wonder if it was possible to continue carrying it all. Would it burst? it thought. Could one small bird bear it without enough time in the world to sing the songs it had in its heart?" Shang Qinghua's hand found Mobei-Jun's cheek and he pulled his face close, so that when he spoke, his lips moved against Mobei-Jun's skin.

The wind ceased, and the air felt so still that Shang Qinghua thought the earth had stopped moving. The sound of woodland animals quieted, and all of the birds Shang Qinghua drew his courage from paused to let him speak.

"But then an emperor drew near the bird's nest," Shang Qinghua whispered. "He was young, not old enough to command the country just yet. He was lost, you see, and the bird had known just how to find him. Nearer and nearer the emperor drew, until he was close." Shang Qinghua shut his eyes. "He was so close that the bird could sing all of his songs, in a single moment, and the emperor could hear all of it, too. Even all at once. He had drawn so near it was like he had reached inside the bird to listen for himself."

Shang Qinghua's lips pressed over Mobei-Jun's cheeks, warm lips to cold skin. He kissed him, over and over, until the warmth from his tears and his mouth was able to soak inside of Mobei-Jun the way Mobei-Jun had soaked himself inside of Shang Qinghua.

"And the songbird," he continued, voice shaking so much he couldn't get the words out clearly anymore. "The songbird followed the emperor." It began to hurt, to think on it any longer. And the more Shang Qinghua thought of it, the more he wished the story would end. He began to hate it, with the deepest part of himself, for it was the most despicable story Shang Qinghua had ever written.

"He followed the emperor to his palace, and to his gardens, and to his dining hall. And he sang until he was hoarse, and he spoke until his lungs lost all breath."

It was so quiet. Shang Qinghua couldn't hear anything. Just himself. Just the sound of his voice cracking over every word.

"The songbird sang until there was nothing left to sing—until the only song he could think of was about the emperor himself. For he was all the songbird could think about. All he could see, all he could hear, all he could breathe." Shang Qinghua's voice was a mere breath. "And when a bird can only see and hear and breathe one thing, without it, the bird will cease to go on."

Shang Qinghua buried his face into Mobei-Jun's hair.

"Without you," he whispered. "I will cease to go on."

The forest was silent without Shang Qinghua's words filling it. There was no wind, no animals, no birds, no trickling water. It was just them. It was just them. Until the leaves moved.

The shadow from before had returned. Now though, in the dim daylight, Shang Qinghua could see it more clearly. It was not human. It had a shape, but few features. Its entire body was dark—black—as though it was a void of space. Tendrils and wisps

of dark floated around it, coiling around it like hair. Though it had no distinguishable features, Shang Qinghua could see its eyes. They were a deep red, like rubies, and they caught in the low light of the forest.

The shadow rounded him, moving to stand before him as he studied Shang Qinghua holding Mobei-Jun in his arms. Its head tilted, just slightly.

Shang Qinghua held onto him tighter. "No," he whispered. Horror mounted in his chest, and his fingers went numb in the tight grip he had on Mobei-Jun's robes.

It had no mouth, but it almost was like it smiled. "Have you determined who I am?"

Its voice was like the voice of a thousand men, all together in one. It made Shang Qinghua shudder. "You are Death."

Death's eyes wound down to Mobei-Jun's face. "I have been planning to take him."

Shang Qinghua held onto Mobei-Jun's head, as if shielding him from his own fate. He tucked him into his throat. "No," he hissed. "No, you cannot. He's—He is..."

"What?" Death asked. It sounded curious, the tone of those voices tilting up. "Tell me, what is he? You say he is the emperor. He is the emperor in your story and in truth. What else?"

Shang Qinghua looked down at him, and felt his face screw up when he took in the near-gray pallor to his cheeks, and the dark circles under his eyes. "He is precious to me."

"Many are precious to those who would mourn them. Since the dawn of time, this has changed nothing."

Shang Qinghua bent low and pressed his forehead to Mobei-Jun's.

Death took a step closer. "I heard you, on the night I first planned on taking him."

Shang Qinghua looked up at it.

"I was curious," Death said, "if he would come to you, after your moving words."

Shang Qinghua glanced back down at Mobei-Jun. He stroked his face. "It was foolish of him to come in his condition." Even he could hear in his own voice that he did not find it foolish.

"Tell me why he is in your story as he is in his life, and why you are merely a bird," Death said.

Shang Qinghua looked up at it. "What?"

The dark red eyes stayed on him, penetrating and deep, like blood. "Tell me, songbird."

Shang Qinghua swallowed, and he looked at Mobei-Jun again, and decided that he would no longer look away. If Mobei-Jun was to be taken from him, he would not lose those moments he had left.

"I don't know," he eventually said. "Because when I first met him, all those years ago, that's what it was like. He was younger than me, and a prince, and I was just—No one had ever looked at me like that before. It was like he'd picked me up in his hands and never let me go. He's held my heart from the moment I saw him."

"You weave pretty words," Death said, "more like a spider spinning its web than a bird singing its song."

Shang Qinghua's lips twitched despite himself. He stroked Mobei-Jun's cheek. "Don't take him from me," he murmured. "If you take him from me, you have to be ready to take me, too. Do not make me part from him."

"I do not take," Death said. "I merely guide. This was his choice, to approach me so boldly. He was toeing the line for quite some time, and every time I came to see him, he was the maker of his condition."

Shang Qinghua frowned, and his thumb found the darkness under Mobei-Jun's eyes, like he hadn't slept in days.

"I will not take him now," Death granted, and the darkness that coiled around him sounded like satin. "Ill-assumptions are my least favorite kind of death. I will give him one last chance. I do not wish to make this trip to him again unless it is my last."

Shang Qinghua looked back up at Death again finally. He swallowed noisily. "You'll let him live?"

"Until his true time comes," Death amended. "Regardless of reason, the next time will be the last," it reiterated.

"Alright," Shang Qinghua whispered quickly.

The simmering rubies of Death's eyes flickered over Shang Qinghua's face, like it was searching for something. It turned away and melted into the woods like it had been there all along. And perhaps it had, for the orange leaves had been falling for days, and the smell of plants had begun to mould into the dirt of the earth.

Shang Qinghua looked back down at Mobei-Jun, and watched his face anxiously. He loosened his fingers from his robes and held his face. "Are you awake, dear one?" He asked.

Mobei-Jun's eyes moved under his lids, flickering, as if he was dreaming.

Shang Qinghua's heart shot up into his throat as he leaned over him. "My love, can

you hear me?"

When Mobei-Jun's eyes opened, they opened slow, like he was blinking into the light. His head turned, just slightly, and met Shang Qinghua's gaze. He stared at him a long while, moving over Shang Qinghua's face as if he was coveting it, drinking it in and savoring every sweep his eyes took.

Tears dripped onto his cheek, falling unbidden from Shang Qinghua's eyes. "Mobei," he said.

Mobei-Jun blinked slowly again. "Qinghua."

"Mobei," he repeated, a wretched sob.

After a moment, Mobei-Jun whispered, "Don't leave. Don't leave again."

Shang Qinghua let out a desperate sound and pressed their foreheads together. "I'm sorry, beloved, I did not mean to. I thought you did not want me to come anymore, I—"

"Never," Mobei-Jun said sharply. "Never. I waited for you, every night."

Shang Qinghua let out an unhappy sound, low. "I didn't know. If I had known, I would have come."

"No," Mobei-Jun said. "No, I should have come to you. Just like before, when we were young."

Shang Qinghua smiled, and he was sure Mobei-Jun could feel it against his cheek. Mobei-Jun's hand came up to caress Shang Qinghua's face in return. "To your bird's nest? In the dark woods in a small cabin?"

"With you," Mobei-Jun said, turning his face up so that their lips brushed. "With you, anywhere, in a place where I don't have to part from you again."

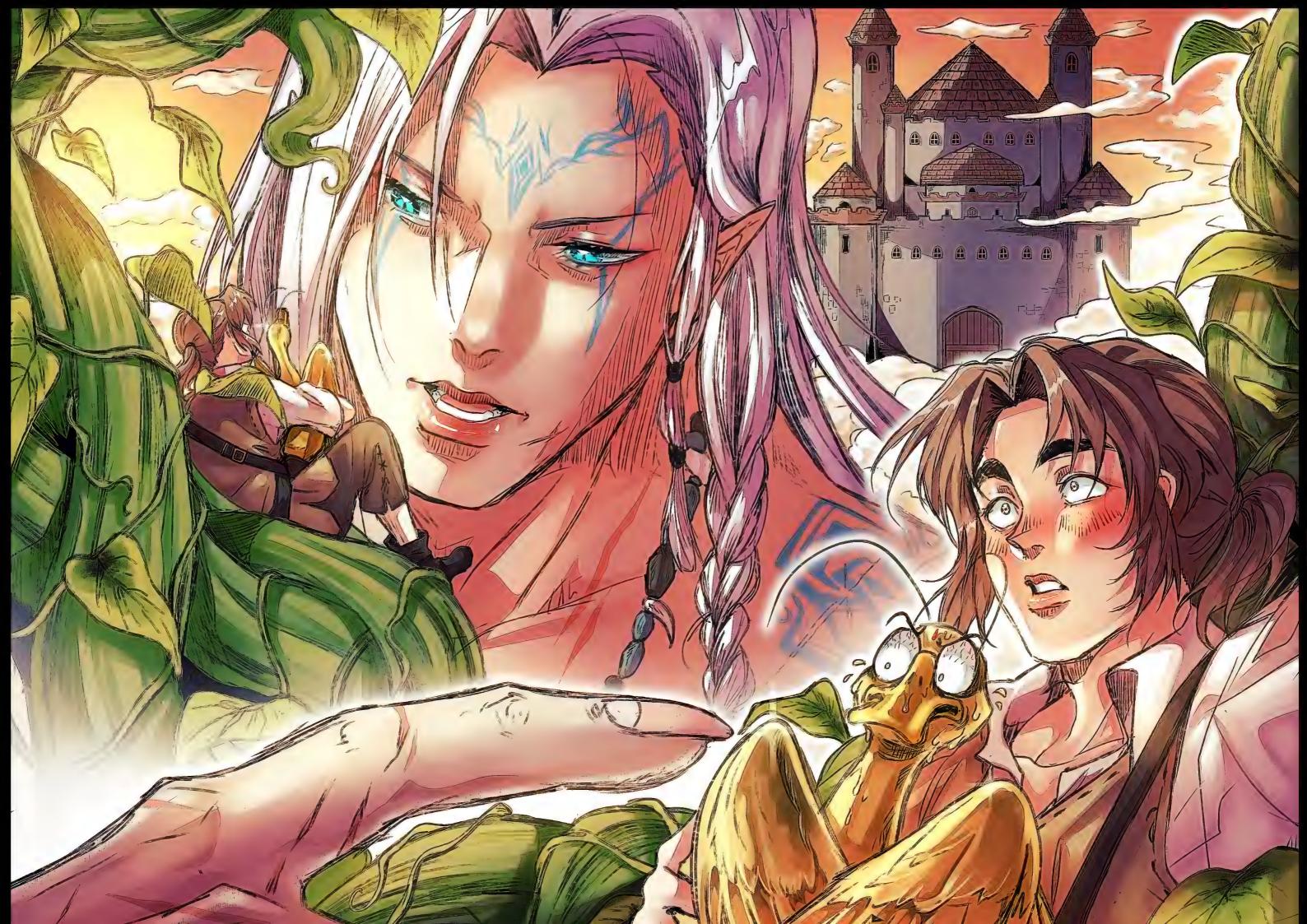
"They would find us here," Shang Qinghua whispered. "They know where I live."

"Then we can go farther, where they won't know where to look. And you can do whatever you please, whatever brings you joy, and I will make sure that you have it, until the end of my days."

Shang Qinghua sniffed, another small sound escaping him. "Then make sure that I have you, where there is no end to your days or mine."

Mobei-Jun tilted up, until his lips connected with Shang Qinghua's, warm again. "I will, until the end of my days, and then after that, I will find you to do it all over again."





THE WONDERLAND SPECIAL EVENT

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua, Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan/Shen Qingqiu, Shen Jiu/Shen Qingqiu, OG Shang Qinghua, Tianlang-Jun, Zhuzhi-Lang, Su Xiyan

Tags

Post-canon, post-airplane extras, pre-moshang get together, System continuously making SQH's life miserable, character study, getting together, humor (attempt), slight angst

Summary

"Fuck this event," Shang Qinghua mutters, pacing the holding cell Red Queen Shen Jiu has unceremoniously thrown him in on sight. "When does this even end?

System?"

<<The Special Event will end once User 001 has fulfilled his mission.>>

"Which is?? What?? What even is the fucking mission?!" << Please listen closely, User 001, as it will only be repeated once. User 001's mission is to find himself!>> "What the fuck does that even mean?!"

Or, the one where The System makes a PIDW Alice in Wonderland Special Event spinoff, featuring Shang Qinghua as Alice. The whole thing makes Shang Qinghua rethink his place in the world since transmigrating in PIDW, forcing him to examine what each of the characters represents in his life, and where he wants to take it next—in particular, his relationship with Mobei-Jun.

A character study of Shang Qinghua/Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky focusing on his relationships with the characters he wrote some essence of himself into and the one character he didn't.

Author:

RANDOMPROSE

Illustrated by:

OPOSSUM

"Qinghua, wake up. We're late."

Shang Qinghua opens his eyes at the feeling of someone shaking him. He squints at Mobei-Jun, standing impatiently at the foot of his bed dressed in a tuxedo, and his fluffy white ears twitching in annoyance.

Ahh. Even with his pissed-off face, his king is really such a sight to behold—wait.

Why is Mobei-Jun wearing a tuxedo? With coattails?? What happened to his usual royal open-chest robes?? His iconic fur cloak???

And why does he have rabbit ears?? Long white floppy rabbit ears! Right there! On top of his head!!

"Get up." Mobei-Jun flicks him on the forehead. "We're late."

"Late for wha—ow!" Shang Qinghua clutches his forehead.

Okay! That actually hurts, so this definitely isn't a dream!

Mobei-Jun glares and his ears twitch. Shang Qinghua thinks it's cute. Really cute! He's half-expecting Mobei-Jun to twitch his nose too. He doesn't. Instead, Mobei-Jun turns around to open a portal and Shang Qinghua chokes on a giggle. There it is! Rabbit Jun has a fluffball tail! Ah! Cute! Too cute!

"Put your shoes on and come! Quickly!"

"Right away, my king! I-huh?"

The rustle of fabric feels different and not like his usual multi-layered peak lord robes. Shang Qinghua looks down and sees he's... changed his clothes? When?? And why is he wearing a dress?? And striped stockings???

He peers over the edge of the bed and sees a pair of black mary janes instead of his usual boots.

What the fuck.

"Shang Qinghua!" Mobei-Jun roars from the mouth of the portal as Shang Qinghua scrambles to follow.

"Coming, my king!"

He steps through the portal—and promptly falls.

"FUUUUUUUCCCCCKKKK!!!"



Shang Qinghua screams, panic rising in his throat as he wonders where Mobei-Jun is. If he's falling then maybe his king is falling too and he can't fly and Shang Qinghua doesn't have his sword and—fuckfuckfuck!

Then he hears the familiar dreaded *ping!* in his head, interrupting his screaming.

<<Greetings, User 001!>>

It's his System! Weird. He hasn't heard from his System since the original plot ended. Why is it suddenly—oh no.

"No," Shang Qinghua breathes out in horror, "No, no, no, no, no!"

<<Welcome to The Wonderland Special Event! We have been preparing this special event for a long time and we hope User 001 will enjoy it! The aim of this event is for User 001 to...>>

"Fuck, no! You've got to be fucking kidding me! Say sike right now!"

The System ignores his protests and continues its event explanation. Shang Qinghua finally stops falling, landing upside down head first before plopping on his back, just as the System finishes its monologue with a cheery << Good luck, User 00!!>>

"Yeah, fuck you too," Shang Qinghua says as he stands up, rubbing his head and his back. At least it didn't hurt as much as he thought it would.

Wonderland Special Event, huh? So this must follow the plot of *Alice in Wonderland*. What did Alice do after she fell down again? There was a door she needed to open but it was...too small? So she had to drink something to...get bigger? No, no, she had to drink it to get smaller, and then she had to eat something to get bigger. Or was it the

other way around?

"Fuck," Shang Qinghua hisses as he tries to remember the right events of the story. "Fucking fuckitty fuck shit. Get it together, Airplane. You know this. Lots of popular media made *Alice in Wonderland* spin-offs!"

He looks around the room. Sure enough, a glass table suddenly materializes with a bottle that says "Drink Me" on the tag.

"Well, that's convenient." He uncorks the bottle, vaguely thinking about how he might be roofie-ing himself, before shrugging and muttering, "Bottoms up."

Shang Qinghua chugs half its content and immediately feels himself shrink. The System is at least merciful enough to shrink his clothes with him. He runs to the smallest door that's supposed to lead him outside—only to find it locked.

"Fuck!"

That's right! Wasn't there supposed to be a key or something? When he looks back up to the table, the key is right there where the shrinking drink used to be. Conveniently materializing right when Shang Qinghua is already small and couldn't reach it.

Shang Qinghua is very quickly realizing *Alice in Wonderland* spin-offs are only fun when you're not the one in it.

Shit. How is he gonna get up there with—oh! There's supposed to be cake or cookies or some shit he has to eat, right? To make him bigger?

He looks around and finds a small chest at the foot of the table. He finds cookies inside with decorative icing that says "Eat Me." Remembering this part of the story well, Shang Qinghua only eats enough to get up to the table. He pockets the rest for later, snatches the key before drinking the rest of the shrinking potion, and successfully opens the door leading out to a garden.

Shang Qinghua warily walks around and takes his time to remember the rest of the story to avoid all of Alice's mishaps. Though with his luck and his shitty System, he's bound to encounter new obstacles. The System also said something about...a mission?

Ugh. He was so busy cursing his stupid System to listen to what his mission was supposed to be.

Well, he does vaguely recall writing a special PIDW Wonderland side story for the VIP fans for...some event or whatever. Airplane just never got around to finishing it because of...reasons he can't remember now.

He takes a tentative lick of the cookies and does a little cheer when he grows back to normal size. Good thing he remembers this part at least.

"Now, where the hell is my ki-"

"Qinghua!"

"My king!" Shang Qinghua swivels around and sees Mobei-Jun, still dressed in his tuxedo and with white floppy rabbit ears, looking more impatient than he was before they stepped through the portal.

"Where were you? Didn't I say we were running late? Come already!"

"Right behind you, my king!"

Shang Qinghua runs after Mobei-Jun through a portal, only to lose him just as he steps out to the other side.

"Fuck!" he howls, stomping a foot on the ground. "I fucking hate this stupid nonsensical bullshit story!"

Shang Qinghua tries to guess where Mobei-Jun ran off and successfully walks himself into a forest.

"Great," he grumbles. "Just fucking great. I'm lost in a dark forest with no light, no way to know where to go, and with my king nowhere in sight."

As he's deliberating whether to go left or right, Shang Qinghua hears rustling in the bushes. Heart suddenly in his throat, he swivels around as his mind races, thinking about this scene and what creature had jumped out at Alice—or what creature the System created to jump him in this scenario.

He's honestly prepared for the worst kind of mutated beast (maybe something from the Endless Abyss with a twist of Wonderland to fit the theme) but instead, what comes out of the bushes is something else—or rather, someone else—and they make Shang Qinghua wish some horrible beast had come out instead.

"No," Shang Qinghua says. "No fucking way. This can't be it."

Two identical Luo Binghes stand before him. One has a mean look on his face while the other is looking at Shang Qinghua warily. They're both wearing matching overalls with suspenders and hats.

"Luo Bing...ge and Luo Bing...mei?"

The mean-looking one—*Bing-ge*, he assumes—scowls and asks, "Who's that?"

"Those are not our names," says the wary

one, *Bing-mei*, with a befuddled look. "I'm Tweedle Dee and he's Tweedle Dum."

"Nuh-uh!" *Bing-ge* protests. "I'm Tweedle Dee and he's Tweedle Dum." He points to himself and then to *Bing-mei*.

"Nuh-uh! I'm-"

"Whatever," Shang Qinghua interrupts. There are more pressing matters than knowing who is who between two Binghes. "Have you guys seen a big white rabbit pass by?"

"Yeah, he went that way." *Bing-ge* points to the left.

"No! He went that way." *Bing-mei* points to the right.

"Nuh-uh! He went-"

"Okay!" Shang Qinghua chirps as he plasters on a fake smile. "This has been very annoying, very unhelpful, and very much a waste of my time. So. I'll be going now. Goodbye!"

"No, wait! Don't go!"

There is a tug at the back of his skirt and Shang Qinghua yelps. *Bing-mei* is clutching at him with tears in his eyes while *Bing-ge* glares at him.

"What the-?! Let go! You-!"

"You haven't even told us your name!"

"That's just common courtesy, you know!"

"Don't you have a shizun to go simp after or something?" Shang Qinghua clicks his tongue as he tugs his skirt from them. Where's Cucumber-bro when you need him, ah? "Why are you out here bothering strangers? Doesn't your shizun—oh, shit!" Bing-ge takes a swing at him that Shang Qinghua barely dodges.

"Hey! What the fuck!"

"Don't ask about Shizun!"

"We"—*Bing-mei* sniffles—"we don't have a shizun. We don't have anyone."

"Whatever," *Bing-ge* scoffs. "It's not like we need a shizun or anyone anyway."

"That's not true!" Tears are now fully streaming down *Bing-mei*'s cheeks. "We get really lonely out here!"

"Shut up! We're fine!"

"Oh. Oh, I see." Suddenly, Shang Qinghua feels his annoyance seep out of him like air out of a balloon replaced with...empathy? Then a sudden urge to laugh.

Really, System? What the fuck?

"Tell us your name!" The two Binghes yell as they pounce on Shang Qinghua, a full 180 from their sniffling and defensiveness just seconds ago. Fickle, manipulative bastards.

"Fine! I'm-"

If the Binghes are Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, and Mobei-Jun is the White Rabbit, then that means Shang Qinghua is Alice. Obviously. But then Mobei-Jun called him "Qinghua," so that means he's still Shang Qinghua, right?

"You're?"

"Shang Qing...hua...?"

"You don't sound so sure," Bing-ge taunts.

"Are you really a Shang Qinghua?" *Bing-mei* prods.

"Well, I-" Technically, in the Peerless

Cucumber-revised PIDW, he is Shang Qinghua. "Not *a* Shang Qinghua. *I am* Shang Qinghua," he says with conviction this time. And then he backtracks. "I mean. Technically."

"What does that mean, technically?"

"Are you or are you not Shang Qinghua?"

Shang Qinghua opens his mouth to argue but before he can even get a word out, one of them shoves him down to sit on a log.

"Never mind that! Doesn't matter who you are or aren't."

"Yes! Just stay for a while. We never get any visitors."

"Even when we do, they never really listen to our stories!"

"Stories?" Shang Qinghua asks weakly. "What stories?"

"Oh, we're so glad you asked!"

"We tell really great stories! Here, listen-"

Shang Qinghua only lingers long enough until both Binghes are distracted before he slowly backs away and goes deeper into the forest to continue looking for his king.

He actively does not think of the two Binghes, their alleged loneliness, or their penchant for storytelling.

Shang Qinghua gets stuck in forest vines at one point. He feels dread creeping up his spine at the thought that this might be a wife plot situation and he's caught in one of the fuck or die plants. Shang Qinghua

struggles to get out of them, caught in an internal dilemma of wanting Mobei-Jun to come and save him or for him to not show up, lest Mobei-Jun witness Shang Qinghua in what he's now sure is a smutty wife plot scenario with the vines porn trope.

Which would be kind of hot considering it's a—

"Shut the fuck up, Shang Qinghua!!" he yells as he struggles against the vines. "This is not the time to be horny about your king, you whore!!"

"Oh?" a voice sounds somewhere. Immediately, the vines drop Shang Qinghua and he lands on his knees with a *thud*. "Who are you and why are you calling me a whore?"

"Bwuh?" Shang Qinghua looks up and around. That voice—why does it sound like—"Where are you? Who are you?"

"I'm right here," the voice sounds in front of him. "And I asked you first. Who are *you*?"

Shang Qinghua whips his head in front and his eyes land on a giant mushroom a few steps ahead of where he sits, languidly smoking a long pipe.

No. That's not right. That's not him. It's someone who looks like him and—

"Oh," Shang Qinghua breathes out as he stands on shaky legs. "Oh, shit."

It's the original Shang Qinghua.

Except he's...a caterpillar. He's the caterpillar who smokes a pipe.

"Who are you?" OG Shang Qinghua asks, blowing out the smoke from his pipe directly at... Airplane Shang Qinghua's face. "Why are you here?"

Airplane coughs and waves away the smoke. "I'm Shang Qinghua," he croaks before he can think about it. He belatedly realizes that might be the wrong answer in the face of the original. "And fuck if I know why I'm here! The shitty System—"

"You can't be Shang Qinghua," the original drawls out. "*I'm* Shang Qinghua."

And he's right. Here is the real Shang Qinghua, the one Airplane basically body-snatched and whose life he basically took over. But is it even body-snatching if he's the one who made him?

In any case, right now, Airplane can at least admit that he's not really Shang Qinghua.

"I'm...Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky."

"There is no such thing as an Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky," OG Shang Qinghua scoffs.

"Of course there is! I'm Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky!"

"Are you? I thought you said you're Shang Qinghua?"

"That—" Airplane chokes, mind going blank. It's like talking to Cucumber-bro but worse. "Well, I was Airplane. Before. But now I'm Shang Qinghua."

"No," OG Shang Qinghua insists impatiently. "You can't be Shang Qinghua because *I'm* Shang Qinghua." He blows another puff of smoke on Airplane's face just to spite him. "So, who are *you?*"

"I told you. I'm Shang Qinghua."

"Oh, yeah?" The original smirks at him. It's such a bizarre thing to see his face make such a twisted expression that for a moment, he forgets they share the same face. "If you're Shang Qinghua, then where's your king?"

"He's—around. Somewhere. He ran off and I'm looking for him."

"The white rabbit, right?" OG Shang Qinghua takes another puff. "You know, I used to follow a white rabbit just like him. Before he—" He stops and the look he shoots Airplane makes his hackles rise. "Or maybe he's really my white rabbit—my king, my Mobei-Jun—and you just stole him from me. Just like you stole my face and my life."

"I didn't steal your life! I didn't even want to—"

"You say you're Shang Qinghua and then you say you're someone else." OG Shang Qinghua's caterpillar body slithers toward Airplane. "You say you didn't want to be Shang Qinghua and yet you claim you are him. Which is it, hm? Who are you, really?"

"That's not-I'm-"

There's a name he used to go by a lifetime ago, one he hasn't used in such a long time that it sometimes feels like he never existed as such. Most days it feels like that part of him was a dream, another character from Airplane's imagination, and these days he even forgets about that person altogether.

But sometimes he remembers. He remembers who he was before he became Airplane, before he became Shang Qinghua. He remembers going by another name. His first one. He remembers being—

"Shang Qinghua!"

Airplane whips his head to where he just heard his name being roared and sees the hulking figure of Mobei-Jun making his way towards him. Airplane has never been more relieved to see his perpetually scowling face.

"My king!" He exclaims. "My king, over here! I—"

Airplane pauses when he hears himself being echoed. He turns to where OG Shang Qinghua and his caterpillar form is now replaced with a human body. One that looks exactly like Airplane Shang Qinghua. OG Shang Qinghua smirks at his horrified look before morphing into a perfect pathetic expression. His voice, when he calls out to Mobei-Jun, is a quivering whiny pitch. He even does the whole teary-eyed, cowering act.

It's the original Shang Qinghua in his truest form.

Mobei-Jun comes through and OG Shang Qinghua immediately latches himself to his side before Airplane even knows what's happening.

"My king! I'm glad you're finally here!" OG Shang Qinghua looks up at Mobei-Jun imploringly. "I found an impostor! It took this servant's form in an attempt to get to you! Be careful, my king! Best to get rid of it now before it causes problems later."

"That's not true! My king! Please believe me! That one is the OG but—"

Airplane feels his throat seize.

No matter what he says, it doesn't change the fact that he's not the real Shang Qinghua. He was even about to say it. And how is he supposed to explain his existence? The one beside you is the original Shang Qinghua but I'm also Shang Qinghua? Yeah, that will go smoothly. As if Mobei-Jun will know who—

"You're not my Shang Qinghua," Mobei-Jun says coldly to OG Shang Qinghua, before promptly shoving him off him and turning to glare at Airplane. "You. Quit running into strange creatures and come along. We're late." And then with a turn of his coattails, he's off again. Leaving Airplane to gape after him.

No second guesses. No explanation needed. As if Mobei-Jun just immediately knows which Shang Qinghua he's been leading on a wild chase all day.

"Look at that," OG Shang Qinghua says. "Guess he's your Mobei-Jun after all."

Shang Qinghua goes on his way and eventually comes across a house in a clearing where it seems that the occupants are moving out. He approaches one of the servants, but they just ignore him. They walk in a straight line, in their yellow uniforms, each carrying luggage. He goes in to look for the house's masters and one of the servants tells him the Duchess is out back.

In the backyard, he sees who he assumes is the Duchess with her poofy regal dress and the fact that another servant is holding an umbrella over her to shield her from the sun. Shang Qinghua walks towards them and sees the woman holding a baby. He comes closer before he freezes in his tracks.

It's Su Xiyan. And she's bundling up a baby and setting it in a basket onto the river.

Except, this isn't the same Su Xiyan in his story. Because this Su Xiyan doesn't look torn to leave the baby in the basket.

"I can't take you with me," Su Xiyan—the Duchess—says flippantly. "You'll just be in the way."

Shang Qinghua knows his characters. It's been years since he wrote them but he

knows them, okay? And this wasn't how the scene with Su Xiyan leaving baby Binghe in the Luo River panned out. She was remorseful, she was dying, and she was in despair at having to leave her baby to fend for himself.

This Su Xiyan is not his PIDW's Su Xiyan, but she does remind Shang Qinghua of another woman. One who echoed her words and sentiments in another world, another lifetime, to another him.

Shang Qinghua turns around and runs back to the forest.

"Fucking shit-heel System," he mutters as he steps over a thick root. "This is the worst Special Event ever. Why is there no map? No quest updates? Why am I just—?"

"There you are!" an annoyed voice sounds overhead. "I was beginning to think you won't show up."

"Now what?" Shang Qinghua grumbles and whips his head around. "Who's there?"

"Up here."

Shang Qinghua looks up and sees...a floating cat head.

"Gah!" He stumbles back, almost tripping on a root. "What the fuck! What—"

"Chill," the cat's head says as the rest of him materializes. "It's just me."

"Cucumber-bro?" Shang Qinghua asks. "No, wait—you're Shen Qingqiu...as the Cheshire Cat?"

"It's me, you idiot."

"Cucumber-bro?" Shang Qinghua winces. "The System got you too, huh?"

"Some stupid Special Event or some shit, which doesn't even involve me apparently. The System just said I'm part of the story and didn't give me much of a choice." Shen Qingqiu scowls, taking a fan out of nowhere and flipping it open. "Anyway, who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm Shang Qinghua!" he answers out of habit. And maybe a little too forceful.

"I know that, dipshit. I meant in this Wonderland Special Event bullshit—wait." Shen Qingqiu gives Shang Qinghua a onceover. His eyes squint when he sees what he's wearing. "Are you Alice?"

Shang Qinghua sighs, "Yeah."

"I thought this event was about Binghe!" Of course, he did. "Why the fuck are *you* Alice?"

"Fuck if I know, bro."

If Cucumber-bro was roped in here but he's just a supporting character, then that means the System made this Special Event specially for Shang Qinghua. Though he has no idea why. Maybe the System just really likes to bully him.

"Speaking of Binghe. You should really check on them, bro. I saw them earlier and the Binghes are a mess."

"Oh, so Binghe is here too." Shen Qingqiu hums as he lazily fans himself, then jolts when Shang Qinghua's words finally register. "Wait. The Binghes? As in plural?"

"Yeah, bro. *Bing-ge* and *Bing-mei*. They're Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum."

"What."

"Yeah."

They're silent for a few beats as they mull over the implications of having two Binghes in one place. And as twins.

"Whatever. Did you see my king—I mean, the White Rabbit? The System gave me a mission and I have a feeling it has something to do with Mobei-Jun."

"Mobei-Jun's the White Rabbit?"

"Yeah, bro."

"...Why?"

"Like I said, fuck if I know, bro,"

"Okaaay..." Shen Qingqiu drags the word, squinting at thin air. Probably at his System. "Says here I have to take you to the Mad Hatter."

"Of course," Shang Qinghua says with a roll of his eyes. He's actually curious who the System cast as Mad Hatter. "This ought to be good."

"System says I have to or...we won't finish the event and we'll be stuck here. What the fuck?"

"Whatever. Anything to get us out of this." Shang Qinghua sighs for what seems to be the thousandth time. Shen Qingqiu opens his mouth to say something but he beats him to it. "Before you say anything, none of this is my fault, okay? I have no fucking idea why the System dragged us into this stupid event. I had a draft like this before but it did not go like this. Shang Qinghua was definitely not Alice in that draft and it was more..." He waves his hand vaguely.

"Filled with plot holes? Straight-up plagiarism of a popular beloved classic?

Lewd? Raunchy?"

"I was gonna say porny but sure let's go with raunchy. Sounds more refined." Shang Qinghua grins. "And hey! Lots of popular media have *Alice in Wonderland* spin-offs! I wasn't plagiarizing anything!"

"Whatever. Anyway." Shen Qingqiu starts leading them toward the path where the Mad Hatter presumably is. "Usually the System's events are more aligned with the book. This one is just a straight-up AU."

"Tell me about it." Shang Qinghua rubs his face tiredly. "This day has been all kinds of weird and too existential crisis-y for my taste. I just want to find my king and get it over with."

Chesire Cat Shen Qingqiu leads them through the forest. When Shang Qinghua asks him how he knows his way around, Shen Qingqiu just shrugs and says, "System."

Figures. Of course, the stupid System will give Cucumber-bro a map and leave Shang Qinghua to his own devices.

And then, because his System truly hates him, Shang Qinghua gets separated from Shen Qingqiu just as they were turning a corner.

This! Event! Is! So! Stupid!

How is Shang Qinghua getting lost at every fucking turn?? He was literally just walking beside Cucumber-bro! Argh!

"Cucumber-bro, you dick! This isn't funny!" Shang Qinghua shouts through the forest. "I swear to god! When I find your bony lily-

white ass I-"

"You'll what?"

"Cucumber-bro! You—" Shang Qinghua whirls around and comes face to face with...not Shen Qingqiu. "No."

"No?"

Sitting at a long table in a clearing Shang Qinghua is sure wasn't there before is Tianlang-Jun and Zuzhi-Lang dressed as...the Mad Hatter and the March Hare respectively.

So, this was why he got separated from Shen Qingqiu.

"So..." Shang Qinghua starts backing away from the clearing. "I'm just gonna—"

"Nonsense!" Mad Hatter Tianlang-Jun says. "You should stay for tea!"

Before Shang Qinghua can turn on his heel, he's shoved into a chair and pushed against the table right across Zuzhi-Lang and to the right of Tianlang-Jun.

"This is really not—" A teacup is shoved into Shang Qinghua's hand. "I really should—" A cookie is shoved in his mouth, which he promptly spits out, lest it does something wacky to him again.

"Tell me. What name do you go by?"

"Shang Qinghua. But listen. I need to-"

"Shang Qinghua, aye? I know a Shang Qinghua and he doesn't look like you. Where's your tail? And your pipe?"

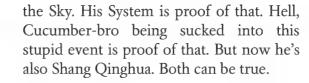
"Well, see, that's another Shang Qinghua but I'm also Shang Qinghua. So, can I just—

"Ah, yes! That makes sense! There are two Shang Qinghuas! But how do you know you're Shang Qinghua?"

"Not this again," Shang Qinghua groans. He just said it makes sense! Why bother saying it makes sense if he's just gonna ask again? Shang Qinghua has no time for another existential crisis! "Listen, I really have to—"

"Oh, never mind that! It doesn't matter. If you say you're Shang Qinghua then you're Shang Qinghua. Nephew, pass me more of the scones, please!"

Shang Qinghua stirs his cup of tea just for something to do. He is Shang Qinghua but he's also Airplane Shooting Towards



"More tea?"

"Oh, uh...sure."

Well, he is a bit tired. Might as well take a short break. Hey! Maybe they know where he can find Mobei-Jun.

"By the way, have you seen a white rabbit?"

"A white rabbit?"

"Yeah. Tall, long white ears, mean handsome face, dressed in a tuxedo?"

"Oh!" Tianlang-Jun snaps his fingers. "The white rabbit! Yes, he did look a little harried when he passed by. Handsome gentleman indeed. He was muttering about a 'Qinghua,' wasn't he, nephew? Maybe that's you!"

Oh. Mobei-Jun is looking for him too?

"Great! Can you tell me where he—"

"But why would he be looking for you? You're just Shang Qinghua, after all!" Tianlang-Jun laughs in good-natured humor and asks Zuzhi-Lang to pass him the butter.

The abrupt dismissal sends a cold feeling down Shang Qinghua's spine, which is...weird. It's not like he's not used to being talked over. Or being told he's of inconsequential concern. It's just that, much like this world's Su Xiyan, this Tianglang-Jun reminds him of another person. He reminds him of missed calls, busy schedules, quick perfunctory checkups over the phone, and voice messages filled with "sorry's", "can't make it"s, and "next time"s.

Shang Qinghua decides he's played long enough with the System's event. He wants to find Mobei-Jun now so he can finally leave this awful place, go back to his busy life as a peak lord-slash-Northern Palace head steward, and forget about this whole thing ever happening. He wants to go home. He wants to see his king.

"Stupid Mobei-Jun running all over the place," Shang Qinghua grumbles as he pushes his chair away from the table. "My king, where the fuck—?"

"Qinghua!"

Ah! Call the king and the king arrives!

Shang Qinghua whips his head to the entrance of the clearing and sees a pissed-looking Mobei-Jun glaring at him.

"My king! You're here!"

Mobei-Jun marches up to the long table, takes Shang Qinghua's hand, and yanks him up to his feet.

"Where the hell have you been? Didn't I tell you we're going to be late?"

"My king, don't be mad at me! I'm the one who's been running after you the whole day!"

Mobei-Jun looks at the long table where Tianlang-Jun and Zuzhi-lang are still having tea. Tianlang-Jun is looking at them all amused with a big smile on his face. Mobei-Jun looks back at Shang Qinghua with his eyebrows raised.

"Weren't you just having tea?"

"Well, I—!" Shang Qinghua feels himself flushing. "I got tired, okay!"

"Mm." Mobei-Jun tugs Shang Qinghua's back to the forest path. "We're leaving."



Shang Qinghua happily lets himself be led away, ignores Tianglan-Jun's invitations for more tea, and does not turn back.

Mobei-Jun leads them through the thick of the woods. Shang Qinghua has no idea where they're going, but Mobei-Jun seems to know the way and even if he didn't, Shang Qinghua is fine with being lost with him.

Funny how he's been feeling anxious and antsy since entering the woods, but finally being with Mobei-Jun; even when he has no idea where they're going, has put him at ease.

He hasn't let go of Shang Qinghua's hand since they left Tianlang-Jun's crazy tea party and you know what? Shang Qinghua is more than okay with it! He's so glad Mobei-Jun is wearing the full white rabbit ensemble and hopes his sweaty hands can't be felt through the white gloves.

They stop at a clearing, and before Shang Qinghua can ask, Mobei-Jun turns to him and says, "Wait here." He releases Shang Qinghua's hand as he walks ahead. Shang Qinghua opens his mouth to protest—he didn't give his permission for Mobei-Jun to stop holding his hand!—but Mobei-Jun whirls back and pins him with a glare. "And don't go anywhere."

Shang Qinghua makes a face once Mobei-Jun's back is turned, but he does as he's told. He finds a nice flat rock to rest on and sits still for three minutes tops before he begins to get bored and fidgety again.

Well, Mobei-Jun didn't say anything about

exploring the surroundings. Anyway, it's not like he's going far. He's just gonna take a look around a bit and be back before Mobei-Jun returns.

Shang Qinghua walks maybe ten steps from where Mobei-Jun left him when Cheshire Cat Shen Qingqiu suddenly materializes in front of him.

"What the fuck, bro!"

"Don't 'what the fuck bro' me! I've been looking everywhere for you!" Shen Qingqiu shouts, his cat ears twitching on top of his head and his tail straightening in anger. "Where the fuck have you been?! I looked behind me and you were gone!"

"Well, I was-"

"Never mind!" Shen Qingqiu waves away whatever excuse Shang Qinghua was about to spout. "I'm taking you to the Red Queen's palace so we can finally end this stupid event. I supposed you've been to the Mad Hatter since my System says I'm supposed to take you to her now."

"What, why?"

"Because that's where the White Rabbit is headed, stupid." Shen Qingqiu sends him a confused, disbelieving look. "Don't you know how the original *Alice in Wonderland* story goes?"

"Bro. It has literally been a very long fucking time."

Shang Qinghua follows Shen Qingqiu through more trees and out to another clearing, completely disregarding Mobei-Jun's instructions. Well, if he's bound to end up at the Red Queen's castle anyway, then Shang Qinghua will just meet him there.

They enter through a side bush and the sight that greets them beyond the hedges



is of Qing Jing Peak disciples painting the roses red.

"Bro! It's your disciples!" Shang Qinghua laughs. "Look at them with their little armor and their little hats and—wait."

"What?"

"If Qing Jing Peak disciples are the knights painting the flowers, then that means..."

The two transmigrators share a horrified look as they reach the same realization.

"Shen Jiu is the Red Queen."

"Fuck this event," Shang Qinghua mutters, pacing the holding cell Red Queen Shen Jiu has unceremoniously thrown him in on sight. "When does this even end? System?"

<<The Special Event will end once User 001 has fulfilled his mission.>>

"Which is?? What?? What even is the fucking mission?!"

<< Please listen closely, User 001, as it will only be repeated once. User 001's mission is to find himself!>>

"What the *fuck* does that even mean?!"

<<It is as it sounds. User 001 can only exit the event when he's fully completed the mission.>>

What is this psychotherapy bullshit his System is putting him through? Find himself? Find himself?! Is there some sort of meta-analysis of PIDW involved here? Why is Shang Qinghua being subjected to this? He's not even the main character! Why

is a cannon fodder character being given an alternate universe spin-off??

"Man," Shang Qinghua sighs as he slumps on the floor. "I really wanna go home."

<<Home? Does User 001 wish to go home?>>

"That's what I've been saying since—wait. Where do you mean home? What do you mean home?"

<< User 001 can select the "HOME" button and be sent back to where he came from.>>

That's...very vague. Did the System mean home as in the PIDW universe timeline he just came from or home as in...the real world?

Shang Qinghua tries to ask the System, but it seems it has decided he has reached his quota of questions.

"Stupid shitty System!!"

Still, the reminder that the option for him to go back to the real world makes him think about it again.

Of course, he's thought about the pros and cons. In fact, there are many pros. Technology, for one. And the Internet. Memes and anime and games. Being able to watch porn again instead of just reading them (he's a very visual person, okay?). Instant food, fast food, and all kinds of junk food. Coffee, soda, and energy drinks that make him feel alive and wired. Boba tea! Not to mention, not having to do endless paperwork and juggle multiple administrative jobs. There are. So. Many. Pros.

And then, of course, the one big con where the real world doesn't have Mobei-Jun. A real living, breathing, walking, in-the-flesh Mobei-Jun. But then, so what? He's just his king's loyal servant. Social standing and status aside, they're not really all that compatible either. It's not like they can—it's not like he can—well, Mobei-Jun surely doesn't—

"Shang Qinghua."

His musings are cut short when he hears a familiar voice by his cell bars and sees—

"My king," he sighs, relieved. Mobei-Jun is glaring at him and there's a tick in his jaw that means he's annoyed, but Shang Qinghua is just glad to see him. "My king, you're here."

"Didn't I tell you to stay where you were?" he snarls as he shakes the bars of Shang Qinghua's cell. "What happened to following me for the rest of your life?"

"Well, I—" Shang Qinghua starts to protest before remembering the events of the day. "Hey! I was following you! I've been following you right from the start! But how am I supposed to stay by your side when you keep disappearing on me?"

"Isn't it Qinghua who keeps looking away from this king?" Mobei-Jun lets go of his hold on the cell and steps back. "Isn't Qinghua the one who refuses to see?"

"That's—" Shang Qinghua surges forward to clutch at the bars. There's a thin layer of ice on them. Ah, Mobei-Jun's really pissed, huh? "What are you sayi—?"

There's a *blip* and the sound of static buzzing in his ears. Shang Qinghua blinks and when he opens his eyes, he's back in the courtroom. Shen Jiu is pointing a fan at him and asking, "How do you plead?"

"I—" Shang Qinghua swallows. "Not... guilty...?"

"Is that a question?" Shen Jiu sneers.

"Not guilty! Still not guilty! I plead—"

"Jury!" Shen Jiu turns to the bench where all of Airplane's characters he's apparently wronged are neatly lined up. "What is your verdict?"

Predictably, all of them say he's guilty. Shang Qinghua scans the lot to see if Cucumberbro is around, but he's not. Instead, there's—

"White Rabbit, what is your verdict?"

Shang Qinghua is sure this is his canon fate catching up to him. His character has always been fated to die at the hands of Mobei-Jun. The plot may be finished and somewhat derailed, but there are some things that are probably just meant to happen.

At least he'll die looking at his favorite character in cute bunny ears and a sexy waistcoat.

"Not guilty."

The courtroom explodes in gasps and whispers.

Wait. What?

"Not guilty, you say? And what about your fate? Did the accused not make it lonely and wretched? Did he not fill it with betrayal and treachery? He left during your ascension when you most needed him and left you for dead afterward despite swearing to follow you for the rest of his life."

"Hey!" Shang Qinghua protests. "I was there! I—"

"Oh?" Shen Jiu turns razor-sharp eyes at him. "But you have no defense for your other crimes? The one where you let Mobei-Jun live a lonely isolated life and his uncle to betray him?"

"That is-I wasn't-"

"You call yourself Shang Qinghua, his loyal servant, but you're not *really* Shang Qinghua, are you? Because the real Shang Qinghua is right here."

OG Shang Qinghua takes center stage and Airplane is forced to look at him like a reflection in a mirror.

"And you've doomed him to die at the hands of his king. Your king."

OG Shang Qinghua's form shifts and suddenly a black ice sword is pierced all the way through him, with claw marks at his neck, and blood dripping from his lips. Just like how Airplane had imagined Mobei-Jun would kill him.

"And you're not even supposed to be here anymore, are you? You've been given the option to leave. Unfortunately," Shen Jiu sneers, "staying here is not a crime as far as the court is concerned, but the absolute ignorance behind the choice is."

What is he supposed to say to that? How the hell could he even begin to explain that "Hey, by the way, I'm not really Shang Qinghua. Actually, I'm not really from this world! And oh, yeah, this was all just a figment of my imagination!"?! How can he even say he's Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky? Or who he really is beyond that stupid pen name? He's lived one too many lives and gone by many names. Sometimes even he's not sure anymore who he really is.

And why did he choose to stay? Well, that's because—

"Does it matter?" Mobei-Jun's voice cuts through the commotion in the courtroom and the storm inside Shang Qinghua. "Qinghua is Qinghua no matter who he says he is. It doesn't matter if he goes by another name. To this king"—chrysoberyl eyes find Shang Qinghua's—"he is simply my Shang Qinghua."

"My king..."

"And the reasons for why he stayed don't matter either." A ghost of a smile makes its way to Mobei-Jun's face and Shang Qinghua feels his heart seize and his breath catch. "What matters is he chose to stay. With this king."

And suddenly it's clear. Suddenly it all makes sense.

He may have been Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky, he may have gone with another name before he was even known as Shang Qinghua, but he has always—always—been Mobei-Jun's.

<<Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Good things must be said in threes! User 001 has completed his mission and finished The Wonderland Special Event. Thank you for participating! Until the next event!>>

"Qinghua, wake up."

"Mngh." Shang Qinghua blinks bleary eyes and sees Mobei-Jun looming over him. Talk about déjà vu. "My king, your bunny ears are gone."

"What?"

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He sits up and looks around the room. It seems he's fallen asleep on his desk in his Northern Palace office. He looks down and sees that, ah, he's wearing his normal robes now.

The Special Event is over.

"Come. We're late for court."

"My king," Shang Qinghua sighs almost dreamily and smiles when Mobei-Jun turns attentive eyes at him. "Thank you for always coming for me. Even in my System's special ev—I mean... even in my dreams."

"Of course. This king will always come for Qinghua," Mobei-Jun answers without missing a beat. If he's confused by Shang Qinghua's words, he doesn't show it. Proof perhaps of how much he's gotten used to all of Shang Qinghua's idiosyncrasies after all their time together. "Qinghua is Qinghua, after all."

"Right. This Qinghua is your servant and—

"Not a servant." Mobei-Jun moves closer, a clawed hand coming up as fingers gently caress Shang Qinghua's cheek. "Qinghua is Qinghua."

"M-My king?"

"This king is Qinghua's, and Qinghua is this king's."

Oh.

Oh.

Ah, really. How had Shang Qinghua not realized it sooner?

"My king, listen." Shang Qinghua takes Mobei-Jun's hand in his. "This lowly one needs to tell you something. Something important." He heaves a breath and looks at his king. His beautiful, perfect king. "But later. After we're done with court. When

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it's just the two of us."

"Later, then." Mobei-Jun gently squeezes Shang Qinghua's hand, seemingly in understanding, before beckoning him to the door. "Don't wander off after court."

A surprised laugh escapes Shang Qinghua.

"Yes, yes. Didn't I already say that this Qinghua will always be by my king's side?" Shang Qinghua boldly entwines their fingers and sidles up close to Mobei-Jun when he doesn't protest. "In any case, my king will just come to get me, won't he?"

"Mm. Always."

They enter the court just in time with their hands still intertwined.



THERE IS A LICHT THAT NEVER GOES OUT

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei Jun/Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei Jun, Shang Qinghua

Tags

childhood friends, prince mobei jun, commoner sqh, angst, pining, major character death, hurt/comfort, possessive mbj, possessive sqh, star-crossed lovers, inspired by hero and leander they invented love your honor

Summary

"Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight?"

With a nearby whisper of water, the night breeze wistfully sprang through the air. Clear skies loomed overhead, framing the stars in kind. Flickering lantern lights glowed in a shimmering gold.

It was across murky waters where Shang Qinghua saw Mobei-Jun for the first time.

Author:

NEV

Illustrated by:

PAPERMELON

"It lies in our power not to love or hate,

For will in us is over-rul'd by fate.

When two are stript, long ere the course begin,

We wish that one should lose, the other win:

And one especially do we affect

Of two gold ingots, like in each respect:

The reason no man knows, let it suffice,

What we behold is censur'd by our eyes.

Where both deliberate, the love is slight:

Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight?"

Hero and Leander, Christopher Marlowe

With a nearby whisper of water, the night breeze wistfully sprang through the air. Clear skies loomed overhead, framing the stars in kind. Flickering lantern lights glowed in a shimmering gold.

It was across murky waters that Shang Qinghua saw Mobei-Jun for the first time.

The young, dirty boy explored restricted territory. Wearing nothing but stained yellow robes torn with use, he ducked beneath low-hanging branches and avoided foreign plants. Leaves crunched beneath his bare feet, echoing his presence. Soil permeated his pores as he neared the rushing water.

Distant was the sound of music singing in his ears and the drunken cheers of carefree commoners settling deep into his gut. Just beyond the forest, a festival was being held in honor of the prince, who had just come of age. Decorations of pale blue and shining white painted the bustling area. It was the celebration of a lifetime.

Yet, Shang Qinghua was far from the village.

He walked for miles until the pads of his feet ached and the wind was swept from his lungs. Knees scraped with blood after befalling to miscellaneous rocks and pebbles. Brown hair continued to escape from its hold, blowing in the wind. Sweat beaded down his face, but nevertheless, the young boy continued exploring.

He didn't know what was prompting him to look. A siren song in his heart, calling from the depths of the forest, it seemed. The young boy followed his urges and delved further into the forest. He was far from the village now, the celebration ceased and music long gone.

The forest was tall and unyielding, a mystery whispered about throughout the townspeople. Some whispered of night beasts, and wandering souls. Others spoke of unlimited fortune and unexplainable magic. Children were warned to beware the wooded gates, but Shang Qinghua had always been a curious child.

The boy followed the tug in his heart and continued searching.

But the journey was rough. It tore at his flesh. His knees ached, throbbing with pain. The boy collapsed against the bark of a tree, heaving for air. His head hung in pain, a sharp noise ringing through his ears. Deeming the search fruitless, the boy stood up on shaky legs and began the trek back to the village, where far, far beyond the forest, the tiniest slither of the village's lantern light shone through the winding branches.

Shang Qinghua could always rely on the lantern light.

But before he could get far, a snap caught his attention. The boy's head whipped over to the direction of the noise. His mind raced with possibilities. The sound was harsher than that of a bird or a small animal, yet it was too light, too perfect to be an act of nature.

It was hard to see, at first.

But then, as if unveiled from a shadowed realm, it became clear as day.

Stumbling forward, Shang Qinghua couldn't decipher his mind's imagination from reality. Rubbing his eyes, the boy shook his head and squinted, leaning forward. A golden shimmer had painted the ground. His head whipped up, but he couldn't identify the source through the trees. With a groan, the boy pushed himself off of the tree and walked towards the mysterious light.

Sounds of a running creek echoed through his ears and the boy was suddenly aware of how dry his mouth was. His heart beat out of his chest, tempo increasing with every breath. Something about the light was magical. It pulled him in with every step.

It wasn't long before Shang Qinghua stumbled upon the edge of a small creek, which appeared to shine a stream of liquid gold. The running water was mesmerizing to the child. The gold reflecting on the sheen of his eyes, the boy gasped softly at the sight. Suddenly, his injuries seemed trivial, forgotten.

He knelt down, hands aching to graze the water.

But before his fingertips could touch, the nearby sound of rustling reached his ears.

The same one he heard when he was in the deep forest. The young boy gulped, but it didn't take him long to identify the source of the noise.

Standing before him, just across the stream, was another small figure, bearing the light before him. The figure was completely shadowed by the light, completely unseen. This person, this creature, was gripping a lantern. One that shone greater than Shang Qinghua had ever seen.

It was impossibly bright, brighter than the sun. The fire burned so bright, it stole his breath.

"State your name," the shadowed figure spoke. Shang Qinghua cocked his head. The voice was unmistakably young and light, but it had an air of authority that couldn't be ignored. Even across the running ambiance of the creek, the words were clear and confident.

He squared his shoulders. "Shang Qinghua," the boy replied, still entranced with the brightly burning flame. "And who are you?"

The question hung in the air, silence ringing between them. It was a pause, hesitance from the other party. Shang Qinghua held his breath. *Perhaps they won't answer*, he thought.

But then, the figure stepped into the light to reveal a small, young face. A boy—a child with dark, midnight hair and fair skin, and rounded eyes. Atop his head sat a golden crown, shimmering in the light. It twisted in golden branches, perching as if it always belonged there. A white pelt laid across his shoulders and draped over a dark cloak that almost grazed the ground. Perfectly tailored.

Shang Qinghua felt a moment of insecurity in his torn robes, yellowed with age. He became all too aware of the dirtied soles of his feet, the throbbing pain in his legs, his windswept hair. It was clear that they were drastically different.

No one from the village looked like the boy he was facing.

He'd be a fool not to realize the unmistakable.

It was then that Shang Qinghua fell to one knee, bowing his head in reverence. The sound of water rushed past his ears but he didn't care, for his hands were shaking. His brown eyes went wide, trained on the ground.

"My prince," he whispered.

Silence drifted between the two boys—one, a poor commoner and the other, royalty of the highest regard.

Trembling, Shang Qinghua raised his head and drank in the image of Prince Mobei-Jun, a golden lantern in one hand and the other hand outstretched towards none other but him.

The only thing separating them was the water.

That night, Shang Qinghua would alter the course of his life when he followed his heart and the pull of his unending loyalty. The young boy, still green with naivety, swam across the small creek, ignoring the current.

And it was when Shang Qinghua's larger hand latched onto Mobei-Jun's small one, that he sealed his fate.

THE PRESENT

TWELVE YEARS LATER

"Rumor has it, the prince might come down from the tower and visit the village!"

"Is it true?"

"Yes, I heard the guards murmuring about it this morning. Him. The prince."

"To even imagine seeing the prince up close..."

"I think I might faint."

"Me too. Let's try and catch a glimpse."

Shang Qinghua smiled to himself as he walked past the giggling group of young girls huddled in the corner, gossiping about the prince. Hands clasped behind his back, he drank in their words as he took slow steps.

The village that once scraped the ground for bare necessities had transformed into a bustling community. Scents of freshly baked goods wafted around the square, settling a hunger in the villager's stomachs. Miscellaneous noises of blacksmiths and metalworkers sounded in people's ears. Joyous laughter was a common sound now, unlike before.

The girls' voices grew distant as he perused deeper into the village center. Shang Qinghua brushed his fingertips atop a rose bouquet as he glided by a wooden flower stand. The delicate petals bounced beneath his touch. He paused, leaning into the arrangement. Various shades of red and pink

"Hands off, thief," a voice hissed into his ear.

/

Shang Qinghua lurched with a yelp. He turned to his left to see a small woman glaring daggers at him, her face decorated with wrinkles and frown-lines. She raised her wooden cane and started sweeping it at his feet.

"Hey-!" Shang Qinghua quickly stepped back, raising his arms. "I wasn't doing anything, I-"

"I don't listen to thieves"—she interrupted hastily, effectively cutting him off. "Now step away from my flowers. I made this arrangement specifically for the prince. It's rumored that he'll visit the village today and I will not have you disrupting my image with your touch." Her voice was filled with malice and she eyed him with a scornful watch.

Her eyes dragged down his new yellow robes, cleaner than anyone's in the village. The color was that of sunset and the quality was luxurious. Each thread was carefully placed and tailored onto Shang Qinghua's body. The flower shop owner scoffed. "I see you've stolen more this time. Whose robes did you steal, thief?"

Shang Qinghua winced but faced the woman, fist clasped.

She leaned against the wooden stand of the flower shop, looking distastefully at Shang Qinghua. Although he was not one to act rashly, the man had to hold himself back at her smug expression. Breathing in and out, Shang Qinghua willed his temper to diminish. Slowly unclasping his hands, he backed away from her. He turned around, walking in the direction he came from.

Letting out a *tsk*, Shang Qinghua knew he needed to speak to *him*.

"That's what I thought!" the taunting voice yelled, laughing triumphantly. The noise

settled something ugly in Shang Qinghua's gut. "No way a writer like you could ever afford robes like those. I know what you are, thief."

Paying her no mind, he walked faster. Past the freshly baked goods and the blacksmiths, past the giggling group of girls. An orange haze fell upon the roofs in the village, painting the sky a rusty gold. Shang Qinghua glanced up and saw the beginning of a sunset.

He walked until he reached the barren edge of the village. The shops here were deserted, abandoned as empty buildings. Ivy climbed up the solitary walls and trees sprung sporadically until it led to the connecting forest. Shang Qinghua shrugged off his outer robe, carefully folding it up and placing it at the bottom of a tree.

And it was then, when he embarked on his usual journey. He ducked beneath low-hanging branches and avoided foreign plants. Leaves crunched beneath his bare feet, echoing his presence. Soil permeated his pores as he neared the rushing of water. Even as he grew older, the routine never stopped.

What seemed like an everlasting trek as a child was actually only a few miles. Shang Qinghua hopped over rocks and branches. It wasn't long before he stumbled upon the small creek, one that seemed so much larger to him when he was a child. It was also the first time he'd met him.

Stepping back, Shang Qinghua propelled himself across, hopping to the other side.

The sun was setting, purples beginning to paint the sky. Shang Qinghua sped up, dodging the trees. He ran until the soil shifted into sand and the trees decreased in volume. Emerging from the forest, he smiled as the beach air hit his face.

He was far, far from the village now.

Just as expected, when Shang Qinghua approached the shore, he already saw the lantern light's shimmering glow reflect beautifully off of the surface. He knows he hasn't visited in a few weeks, and for good reason. But the man was nothing if not persistent.

Putting his shoes to the side, Shang Qinghua takes a step into the water and swims forward.

The waters were never kind to Shang Qinghua.

Chaos always draped the waves, the tide pushing with an unyielding strength. Water was a calamity in the raging ocean and it remained unpredictable in its movements. Shang Qinghua allowed the water to rush around him, enveloping him in its cool embrace. It carried him every which way, dragging him north and south. The current was strong, as usual.

Reluctantly, he opened his mouth and let himself exhale, the bubbles following the direction of his breath. Opening his eyes, dark blue was painted around him. He can't see much, but what he can see is beautiful. He didn't think he would ever get tired of the sight.

Arrays of blue and navy shimmered around him, the fluid water dancing before his eyes. He craned his neck up to see the slightest bit of gold peeking through the translucent surface of the ocean. Shang Qinghua smiled. Bringing his arms forward, he pushes back against the current, catapulting him deeper, further.

He swam and swam, dutifully following the line of the light, muscle-memory taking over.

Between strokes, he raised his head, gasping for air and briefly glanced up at the light. In those moments, the sparkling golden light would reflect in his eyes as he gazed up towards it. Shang Qinghua knew he was getting close when his vision started to make out the silhouette of a tower that housed the guiding light.

Shang Qinghua's bones ached, but he dutifully obeyed the light that did not dim.

For it never dimmed when Shang Qinghua was near.

As his head shot up from the water, Shang Qinghua allowed the air to enter his lungs with a sharp gasp. His chest heaved uncontrollably, and his heart beat the inevitable way it always would after the daunting swim. He wiped the water from his eyes and stepped forward, inner robes completely soaked. The thin fabric stuck to his body like a second skin and his hair was laid around his head, soaked with water and plastered to his cheeks.

The shore was rocky, decorated with sharp minerals that gradually drifted off into sand. Shang Qinghua dug his toes into the ground, leaning forward on his knees and caught his breath.

Behind him, the waters continued to roar.

Shang Qinghua continued to breathe heavily. It had been a few weeks since he'd last done this. Eyes closed as he coughed out the droplets of water that made it to his lung, he didn't notice the approaching figure.

"Shang Qinghua," a voice boomed. "Where have you been?"

The heaving stopped and Shang Qinghua froze. Without having to open his eyes, he already knew who it was. The dark timbre, low authoritative baritone that was impossible to argue. Slowly, Shang Qinghua lifted his head and drank up the sight before him.

In front of him was no longer the small and pretty fragile boy that he once knew. In the beginning, it was fair to say that Shang Qinghua towered over the young prince. But now, the prince stood a head and a half above the writer.

The man filled out considerably over time, gaining the muscle and body weight that any royal was expected to have. Shoulders broadened, as expected of a prince. What once were uncoordinated limbs were now tuned with precision. Mobei-Jun was an ethereal beauty, truly unlike any other. His skin smooth and unblemished, his jawline cut to perfection. The picturesque prince, nothing less for a boy of his upbringing.

Around such a beauty, Shang Qinghua truthfully felt like he himself was something akin to a shriveling, annoying church mouse that scurried past fair-skinned legs and lived in the garbage.

"My prince," Shang Qinghua greeted with a low bow, knees bent. As he tilted his face down in respect, damp chestnut hair fell into his vision. It truly had been a long time since he'd visited and it was evident in his trembling voice.

A large, pale hand grabbed a loose strand and tucked it behind his ear.

"Answer my question," Mobei-Jun grumbled softly, his hand still hovering near Shang Qinghua's cheek. The calm, cool voice sent shivers down Shang Qinghua's spine. He would never tire of it.

Shang Qinghua closed his eyes and found himself leaning into the warm hand. Although Mobei-Jun's body ran cold, it was always warm enough for Shang Qinghua when he shivered at the beachfront. Just being near the man was satisfying enough for Shang Qinghua, but he knew the reason he came by. The reason why he hadn't visited in over three weeks.

"My prince," Shang Qinghua started slowly. "You know why I haven't come. Why have you continued to beckon me with that lantern every night?"

When he opened his eyes, he couldn't help but gasp at the sight before him. Two chrysoberyl eyes stared deep into his soul, unforgiving and unyielding. Shang Qinghua had stared into those eyes many times before but each time, it never failed to steal his breath away. The smoldering gaze reminded him of the raging ocean.

"Why did you spread a rumor that you'd visit the village?"

Mobei-Jun ignored the first question but answered this one. "Do I need a reason?"

"Surely you have one," Shang Qinghua reasons. "My prince hates the journey to the village."

Mobei-Jun looked away from him for the first time, gaze trained on the shoreline. He paused. Shang Qinghua was tempted to follow his gaze. "Well, I suppose it has to do with someone who neglected to visit this prince."

Shang Qinghua gapes. "Am I being blamed for the commotion happening in the village right now?"

The other man moved his gaze from the shoreline and stared at Shang Qinghua with downturned eyes and the slightest pout of his lips. A pout! This tall, powerful prince with the ability to buy out his entire livelihood with a snap of his fingertips pouted. "Maybe."

A spoiled prince, Shang Qinghua thought. He ignored the tugging feeling at his lips.

He won't smile. He won't.

Mobei-Jun seemed to notice this, because his eyes narrowed and he swiftly took Shang Qinghua's hands into his own. Yanking, he pulled them both towards the lighthouse, ignoring the objections from his companion. "Come," he ordered leaving no room for argument.

Shang Qinghua banged his hands against the strong arm to no avail. "My prince! Hold on—!"

It was a fruitless attempt against a prince's strength. With all his might, Shang Qinghua threw his whole body weight in the opposite direction until his hand slipped out with a pop!

Only then, did Mobei-Jun stop and look at the other man, who was now leaned back against the sand from the impact. Shang Qinghua rubbed his behind and glanced at Mobei-Jun with a sheepish look. He didn't need to know the man to know that he wasn't happy.

The prince sighed. "What is it, Qinghua?"

"I just," Shang Qinghua stutters. "I'm just concerned. Are you sure it's okay for me to be here, I know your father—"

"It's okay."

Mobei-Jun cut him off with a firm voice. He made it clear that the conversation was over. Mobei-Jun wouldn't be speaking of it anymore. And without warning, the man stomped forward and lifted Shang Qinghua

from the ground and into his arms, as if he were as light as a feather.

"My-My prince-! I can walk-!"

But the prince didn't stop. He doesn't even glance down at the body in his arms as he spat right back, "Clearly I cannot trust you with your legs. What prince would I be if I didn't help my servant."

"

"But I'm not a servant—!"

The last thing nature heard was the deep chuckle of a delighted prince and the nervous shrieks of his favorite commoner before they entered the gates of the tower.

The tower was tall and overbearing. It was flashy and fit for a prince. Decorated with stone and dressed with ivy, the only window was one at the very top. There, a ledge sat and it was where Mobei-Jun often stood, glancing out at the sea.

Shang Qinghua loved the view. Sat atop the ledge, he could watch the ocean rise and fall. He was always entranced by the soft movements of the water. And if he squinted hard enough, he could make out the silhouette of his village in the distance. Sometimes he couldn't believe that his small body could really travel so far.

The ledge was also where he'd often sit with Mobei-Jun. Well, Shang Qinghua often leaned back on the edge, one knee pulled up to his chest and the other one hanging towards the ground. Mobei-Jun, on the other hand, had his own armchair sat beside the window made with sheep's wool.

Together, Mobei-Jun would listen to the commoner as he animatedly told a tale he'd written himself. They tended to be fantastical and unrealistic, shunned upon in the village. But Mobei-Jun always listened.

"Then the fire erupted and the dragon flew out of the magician's tight grip, escaping him—my prince, are you even listening to me?" Shang Qinghua would stop and ask some days.

And without fail, the prince would always respond: "I'm always listening to Qinghua."

And without fail, Shang Qinghua would fall into a blushing cough.

Most days when Shang Qinghua visited, Mobei-Jun would set up hefty meals, wiping the water off the commoner. He'd listen in apt silence as the smaller man talked and talked. Shang Qinghua would speak until the midnight sky was painted a sunset orange. He'd send him off with a full stomach and a promise of a return.

But this time, it was different.

There was no story time, no fancy feast. Mobei-Jun led the commoner up the round stairs; the only noise heard was the click of shoes on the wood. The air was tense. By the time they reached the top of the tower, Shang Qinghua was out of breath again.

"My prince—"

"Qinghua did not visit when I called."

Shang Qinghua gulped. His lack of presence was evident in the vast room. Marble floors were smudged and the mantles were collecting dust. Shang Qinghua often cleaned it for the royal family without asking. In fact, Shang Qinghua often did the cooking and the cleaning. Anything to improve the other man's living conditions.

He did, in fact, notice the lantern lighting up every night at the same time without fail. Shang Qinghua would be sitting in his cot when the golden shimmer shone through his small window. But for the first time since they were children, he'd resisted.

Looking away from the other man, he crossed his arms in defense. "My prince knows why I didn't respond."

"Qinghua." It was a statement. A reprimand.

"They're figuring it out, my prince. Albeit, slowly. A commoner like me should not enter the prince's quarters like this. They'd kill me and you know it."

Mobei-Jun's face was still. Not a single muscle moved before he spoke: "Qinghua survived this long."

The chestnut haired man threw his hands up in exasperation. "Yes, but not without being caught —my prince, I can't be here. The people will talk."

"Let them talk."

"They're already talking."

Shang Qinghua could recite from his head the amount of dirty glares and stares he received in the past. Derogatory whispers hushed into his ear from every direction and it permeated into his gut, repeating and repeating. Thief. He's a thief, that Shang Qinghua.

The prince grunted. "It doesn't matter what they say."

Shang Qinghua sighed and faced the window, giving him his back. Anywhere else, he could be punished with his life, but Mobei-Jun never minded this kind of thing when it came to him. Watching the window, Shang Qinghua spoke quietly. "It matters, my prince."

Silence befell them. The only sound that could be heard was their shallow breaths and the occasional splash of waves on the shore. Wordlessly, Mobei-Jun stood up and grabbed a thick cloth from his side. Placing it on Shang Qinghua's damp head, he began softly scrubbing and wringing the water out. His eyes drifted closed on his own, lips falling open with a soft groan. The massaging hands twitched.

Being serviced by the prince was a luxury that the villagers could only dream of. Who was Shang Qinghua to receive it so casually? As he matured, he learned how odd their relationship really was, and how it had the potential to negatively reflect on his friend.

A friendship between prince and commoner? It was simply unheard of.

The moment was intimate. Mobei-Jun was not known to be a benevolent prince. He was mysterious and reigned from a distance. The villagers only ever saw glimpses of him, and rumors of his appearance spread hastily. For all they knew, Mobei-Jun was mysterious but he always had the village's best interests in mind, he always seemed to understand what they were looking for.

Little did they know, it was all because of Shang Qinghua. He would feed the prince all kinds of insights about the village, how they were short on food one year, how the cloth business was declining. And in a moment's wake, the prince would solve the issue with seemingly perfect timing.

Shang Qinghua never asked for credit. He knew what would happen.

"Do you know they've been calling me a thief?" Shang Qinghua broke the silence.

"A...thief?" Mobei-Jun's voice was incredulous. The hands on his hair froze.

He turned around, and gave the prince a sad smile. "Why do you insist on buying me the newest robes, my prince? You know they're better than what the village could ever afford. I'm so out of place, that they've resorted to calling me a thief. They think I've stolen the robes."

Mobei-Jun's face contorted into something brimming with unbridled anger. Chrysoberyl eyes wide open and nostrils flared. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. Scarily so. "They dare?"

Shang Qinghua wasn't familiar with such a chilling expression.

"It's alright, my prince. If you announce me to the village, they'd think that I tricked you. I'll visit instead. Or maybe you can visit me in my shed—"

"No." Mobei-Jun stated. "Qinghua will not."

"Then come with me; we can put you in a hood. Let me introduce you to the places that inspired my stories. Before it's too late," Shang Qinghua begged. He didn't even notice how far he was leaning into Mobei-Jun's space until his face was centimeters away from the prince's. He felt a cool breeze on his cheek. Mobei-Jun's eyes flickered to his lips. His breath hitched.

They were close. So close. Just a press forward and their lips would touch. Shang Qinghua's heart beat out of his chest.

And then, "Not yet." Mobei-Jun coughed into his hand and stepped away.

So much for that.

If Shang Qinghua paid any attention, he might have noticed the faint blush dusting pale cheeks. Or the hands that inched towards his waist, slim with activity. But alas, he was thoroughly distracted by the

close proximity and swift rejection.

It wasn't long after that that Shang Qinghua was escorted back to the shoreline, preparing for his journey back. "Why don't you let me get you a boat?" Mobei-Jun asks.

"It's too suspicious; people will wonder where I'm going if I appear on a boat." And as dawn broke and the sun began to rise above the horizon, Shang Qinghua dove straight into the water.

At night, he's guided by the lantern light. In the day, he's led by the sun's natural glow.

What Shang Qinhua didn't know was that if he took his eyes off of the sunshine, if he glanced backwards just once—he would see the figure of a lonely prince with an arm outstretched towards his retreating body.

The following day, Shang Qinghua felt that something was off.

The village was quiet. They whispered strangely. They spoke in hushed tones and over-the-shoulder glances. Villagers were huddled into small groups, speaking softly amongst themselves. And specifically, he felt eyes on him. The piercing stares of children and adults alike dug into his figure from every direction.

"What's going on?" he murmured to himself.

Looking down, he noted that he wasn't wearing anything out of the ordinary. Earlier that morning, Shang Qinghua had even made the decision to choose one of his older, more inconspicuous outfits. The air in the village was tense. A strange sense

of foreboding came upon him.

Walking further into the village, he began to pick up tidbits from the chatter. But nothing could have prepared him for what he was about to hear.

She said she saw him—

The world slowed. No.

The thief—

Shang Qinghua's heart fell to his stomach.

In the water—

He couldn't breathe.

With the prince—

Everything came to a stop.

Shang Qinghua froze, his vision white and a ringing in his ears.

Questions ran through his head, a mile a minute. How did they find out? Who is she? Will he be punished? And as if on cue, the gazes on his figure began to feel more like a burn. The whispers were akin to screams, and the judgemental stares set Shang Qinghua into flight. He wanted to explain, maybe come up with a story to cover.

But Shang Qinghua was paralyzed. The main concern was more important than his own reputation, or what the people may think of him. They wouldn't believe him no matter what he said.

The only thing that made him pause, that truly instilled fear within his heart was:

What will happen to Mobei-Jun?

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And that realization sparked something within him. Without a moment to spare, Shang Qinghua's feet took off on their own towards the direction of the exit. His feet

pounded into the ground but the ache escaped his mind. The wind pushed his bangs away as he sprinted as fast as he could.

Behind him, he heard gasps. His peripheral vision he saw pointed fingers and scalding looks. He couldn't distinguish the screams over his beating heart.

Soon, he began his routine of ducking beneath branches, swinging past large gaps, jumping over sharp rocks. In his haste, he vaguely understood the pain on his feet, the cuts and bruises he might have accrued already. He was sure he left an easy trail for the angry villagers to follow, but Shang Qinghua didn't have it in him to care.

When he reached the sandy shore, he didn't waste a moment of time before shucking his shoes and diving into the ocean. With the sun still out in the early morning, Shang Qinghua didn't need the assistance of the lantern. With the light, he could make out his surroundings easily. He didn't have time for Mobei-Jun to beckon him.

As always, the waters were not kind to Shang Qinghua.

They seemed to mimic the state of his mind, roaring uncontrollably, pushing him every which way. It was rough, the strength of the waves were strong. It suffocated him, the only thing saving him was his gasps for air and reassurance from the sun that the tower was near.

His feet moved like flippers and his arms moved the fastest they'd ever moved. Shang Qinghua only had one thing in mind and it was Mobei-Jun.

Bursts of pain shot up his limbs and he felt them weakening. But by the time he reached the rocky shore, Shang Qinghua did not heave for breath, nor did he wait to be lifted by the prince. With his knees threatening to buckle, Shang Qinghua ran towards the tower's door.

Every bone in his body screamed for him to stop but he persisted. With his fists, he banged on the door as hard as his body permitted him to.

"My prince! My prince!" His voice was hoarse. There was still some water in his lungs. "My prince!"

The heavy thump of his fists echoed around him and the vibration of it was evident on his shaking hands. But yet, the prince did not answer. Shang Qinghua tried again. "My prince! Open up, it's an emergency! Please!"

Desperation filled his lungs and he could already feel his body growing weak with fatigue.

"Please! My prince!" Then, the wooden door opened. Shang Qinghua fell to the ground in relief, his body relaxing at the sensation. He was out of breath and soaking wet. But all was okay because Mobei-Jun was there.

His head leaned back, exposing his neck, and he breathed, "Oh, My prince, you answered! You truly don't know how long I've been calling for you—"

"What are you doing here?"

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Shang Qinghua's eyes shot open. The voice that responded to him was not the warm, soft voice that he had expected. But it was cold and unfeeling. Detached, as if he were unfamiliar with Shang Qinghua. As if Shang

Qinghua's presence was a nuisance. An ugly feeling settled in his stomach.

"My prince...?" Shang Qinghua questioned.
"I know I arrived unprompted but I came to tell you something important."

Mobei-Jun's face was impassive. Unreadable. Shang Qinghua always prided himself in being able to distinguish the emotions in the pale face, but this time it was as if a wall were built between the two of them for the first time since they were children.

Without regard for Shang Qinghua's exhausted, soaked state or his bruised feet, Mobei-Jun regarded him once more with a look of impassiveness. "You shouldn't be here."

"I know you didn't call me but I—"

"Go."

Shang Qinghua fell back in shock. "My prince, tell me what's wrong. My prince, Mobei-Jun—"

"Get out of my sight."

Mobei-Jun's voice boomed with authority and without a single drop of empathy. In that instant, the difference in their social classes was evident. To Shang Qinghua, this was the first time that it felt as if they were prince and peasant. A rich prince who had no time to spare for a peasant.

Something cracked within Shang Qinghua's heart, shattering into millions of pieces. Perhaps it would have been better to be stabbed than to be treated like a stranger by his closest friend and confidante.

He wanted to scream or wail, maybe hug the man's thighs and demand what was wrong. His brain alerted him to the unsettling feeling creeping in his chest, an indication that something was terribly wrong. But the



words echoed in his brain like a disease.

So, confused and disoriented, Shang Qinghua obeyed and staggered back to the rocky shore until the water narrowly grazed his toes. He glanced back to the tower and caught the sight of Mobei-Jun's unwavering visage. There was no warmth, not a single trace of the boy he met all those years ago.

It was as if he were looking at a completely different man,

And with the pieces of his broken heart cradled close to his chest, Shang Qinghua stepped into the water once more. He would not look back. Because deep down, he knew he would run back to him if he did.

That day, many things happened that Shang Qinghua never lived to know.

Behind Mobei-Jun in the tower were guards from the village who had heard of the mysterious man that had been visiting their prince and came to investigate. Apparently, an old woman who owned a flower shop had followed him to the shore and witnessed it with her very own eyes. Death threats and abuse alike were threatened to not only Shang Qinghua, but to even the prince himself. Outrage sparked across all fronts.

If it is true, how can we have a prince who associates himself with the lowest of the low? What might that say about us, our village and this kingdom?

Mobei-Jun knew that the news was likely already spread throughout the small village and that Shang Qinghua had already found out. He knew the smaller man would likely make a rash decision, one that would get him in trouble. But when he glanced out of the ledge and saw the unmistakable figure swimming with urgency while the guards peeked over his shoulder with harsh exclamations, he felt a sense of dread.

Mobei-Jun needed to protect them both.

So, when his Shang Qinghua yelled and pounded on his door, soaked with water with bruised arms and feet, it took everything within him not to take him into his arms and nurse him back to health. Mobei-Jun had never been the nurturing type, always keeping others at a distance. But Shang Qinghua was always the exception.

But later that evening, when the guards were asleep, Mobei-Jun floated to the ledge on quiet feet. And as the stars decorated the sky and the air grew cold with the midnight chill, he couldn't help but light his lantern

and raise it above the ledge.

The shimmering glow illuminated the entire tower. He raised it above and prayed. Shang Qinghua's hurt expression would be permanently etched into his brain for the rest of his life, but he knew that the smaller man had a weakness for him. Shang Qinghua always came when Mobei-Jun beckoned.

And after a few short moments, he could see the unmistakable splash of water from far across the other side. It was inconsistent and urgent. Mobei-Jun smiled. There he was.

But unfortunately for him, Mobei-Jun was so engrossed with the sight, it was too late when he noticed the outstretched hand loom past his face to realize that a guard snuck up behind him.

Mobei-Jun jerked in surprise. and in that surprise, for the first time in his life, the



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lantern slipped from his fingertips and crashed to the ground. Thousands of glass shards spread onto the marble floors and Mobei-Jun could only stop and stare.

Just like that, the light diminished. The large room was encased in pitch black, the only light being the shine from the moon. Anger was not a strong enough word to describe how Mobei-Jun felt. He heard the breath hitch from the guard in the room.

His hands itched to do something vile, something heinous to the other person. His vision was coated in blood red. But before he could do anything, the distant sound of splashing could be heard. Whipping his head to the side, Mobei-Jun could only watch in horror as Shang Qinghua struggled to stay afloat and swim in the right direction as the current pulled him in the opposite direction.

He shoved the guard aside, ignoring their cry of pain. Mobei-Jun could deal with them later.

After sprinting down the flight of stairs and barging the door down, he faced the open water. The splashes targeted something deep within him. Without a moment of hesitation, he dove into the ocean.

Shang Qinghua always found Mobei-Jun. This time, Mobei-Jun would find Shang Qinghua.

Shang Qinghua thought he knew fear.

He'd been the center of derogatory glances and threats. He explored a forbidden forest when he was a child. He'd faced the brunt of Mobei-Jun's cold, cold gaze.

Go.

Get out of my sight.

But nothing-nothing-had ever instilled

the level of fear in him than what occurred when the lantern light suddenly went dark.

When Shang Qinghua reached the shore after being cast out, he remained there. Mobei-Jun had been acting out of his ordinary. He only meant to sit there and reflect, but dead in the night, he couldn't believe it when he saw the lantern shine bright across the water.

And not even ten minutes later, it disappeared.

A particularly rough wave crashed over him and sunk him beneath the water. Shang Qinghua flailed and kicked, but the pressure was too strong. And even as he floated under the water, struggling for air, limbs flailing as the ocean moved around him, he couldn't help but observe the moon hanging above the water, just past the surface.

Without the lantern, it was so, so dark.

He gasped, letting the water fill his lungs and his hand reached out to the light. And when his eyes shut, he could if he could still see it past his eyelids. The water carried him away, to where he didn't know. The water rushed into his ears until he could hear nothing but his own thoughts.

He saw glimpses of his childhood. His explorative streak. He thought of Mobei-Jun. How he stumbled upon the boy across a creek. Shang Qinghua didn'tt know how he never realized the irony of it until now.

The last thing Shang Qinghua sees before he lets the water completely overtake him is two chrysoberyl eyes filled with worry and a pale arm outstretched towards him. "They're over here!"

"Is it really them? I didn't believe it at first."

"It's a shame what happened to those two."

"May the Gods be kind to them in the afterlife."

The next morning, the guards and villagers swarm Shang Qinghua's beach front, his shoes still abandoned on the side. Commotion erupts within the people.

For a prince and a thief were found washed up on the shore, their lives fully succumbed to the water. They were pressed close like lovers, their fingers intertwined.

It was across murky waters where Shang Qinghua saw Mobei-Jun for the first time.

And it was within murky waters, where Shang Qinghua saw Mobei-Jun for the last time.

Through murky waters they were introduced and in murky waters, they are immortalized forever.

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UNTIL THE LAST PETAL FALLS

Rating:

Teen

Relationships

Mobei-Jun/Shang Qinghua, Tianlang-Jun/Su Xiyan

Characters

Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun, Shen Yuan, Linguang-Jun, Tianlang-Jun, Su Xiyan, Luo Binghe, Sha Hualing, Shen Qingqiu, Zhuzhi-Lang, Gongyi Xiao, Liu Gingge, Yue Qingyuan, Qi Qingqi

Tags

Beauty and the Beast AU, Fairytale AU, Fluff and Humor, Angst With a Happy Ending, Hurt/Comfort, Canon-Typical Violence, Childhood trauma, Parental neglect and manipulation, Linguang-Jun's A+++ parenting, Character tries to force another character to commit suicide, (Former character not a main character)

Summary

Shang Qinghua is but an unimportant and overworked scholar in the court of Emperor Linguang-Jun, caught in the middle of civil strife. When Shen Yuan, his only friend in court, goes missing, Shang Qinghua retraces his steps to an ice palace, where he's held captive by a terrifying beast. Left with no other choice, Shang Qinghua makes a deal with the beast and takes Shen Yuan's place.

A world of wonders opens up to him, full of magic and talking furniture and love, at the same time as an old conspiracy that shook two kingdoms begins to unravel...

Author:

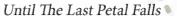
ELLIE MELLIE

Beta(s):

Illustrated by:

JIN, OTTISTRY, QUILL, PIP

BERG





In a palace in the woods, a little prince once cried himself to sleep with a white rose on his pillow. In the morning, a beast woke up in his place to the blinding light of a magical crystal flower.

A structure of ice and frost stood where the palace once was. Eternal winter ruled, and the palace's residents had a single hope to be kissed by spring again.

Shang Qinghua was going to die. There was no doubt about it!

When he took Shen Yuan's horse, hoping she would lead him to her master, he sure didn't expect her to take him to the middle of the Cursed Wood, to a palace made of ice, and to then *leave* him there! Alone!

Dammit Shen Yuan! Why did he and his friends have to get Shang Qinghua mixed up in their little coup! Linguang-Jun wasn't even that bad of an emperor! Except for the assassinations. And the mysterious disappearances of dissenters. And the laws that only benefited his allies—

Well, he was a bit of a dick. Still, it wasn't Shang Qinghua's problem!

Now Shang Qinghua was Shen Yuan's only hope. But no one left the Cursed Wood alive, much less without a ride.

Seeing no better option, he pushed the gate of the ice palace open.

Unsurprisingly, he found Shen Yuan in the dungeons.

Heavens, this place was even more freezing than the rest of the ice palace! There were no fires here; only a few candles lit up a hallway of cells.

Shang Qinghua ran up to one cell where Shen Yuan was lying on a bench.

"What the—?" Shen Yuan pushed himself up and stumbled towards the bars. "What are *you* doing here?!"

Shang Qinghua blinked at his paleness, his trembling body, his blue lips. "What happened to you?"

"What happened is that Linguang-Jun's minions ambushed me and I could only escape them through here, but—" This was cut off by

dry coughing that shook him whole. "It...doesn't matter. You need to leave! Now!"

"Let's get you out first!"

"Aren't you listening?! Get-"

A low growl from behind turned Shang Qinghua's blood into ice.

Slowly, Shang Qinghua turned around. White fur glistened in the candlelight. Huge claws and an enormous maw with sharp teeth made his knees go weak.

Over him towered a tall, terrifying beast.

"Who are you?"

"Let him go!" cried Shen Yuan. "He was just looking for me. He's innocent!"

"He's trespassing."

"Only because you're keeping me here!"

"You were trespassing as well!"

As they argued, Shang Qinghua did some quick calculations. Cursing the heavens internally, he made a decision.

He dropped to the ground and hugged the beast's thighs.

"My lord..." He wept very real tears. "I beg of your magnificence! Let my friend go."

"Get. Off. Me."

"I will do anything! I-I'll even take his place! Please, your worship! I would owe you my everlasting gratitude!"

"Shang Qinghua!" cried Shen Yuan, fragile voice cracking. "What on—?"

"You would take his place?" The beast's eyes bore through his skull.

"In a heartbeat."

I have no other choice!

Shen Yuan would die from the cold long before he could bring back-up for a rescue! And Shang Qinghua needed Shen Yuan if he wanted to survive all the court drama. Linguang-Jun considered him another traitor to the crown because of his friendship with Shen Yuan, while Shen Yuan's friends either looked down on him or were distrustful of him... No one else would protect him!

If Shen Yuan got out though, he'd come back to rescue him. It was his best bet!

Thus, one sickly prisoner rode off into the night, and another took his place. Not much had changed perhaps...

But a candlestick on a shelf that had witnessed everything disagreed.

This was the beginning of something. Tianlang-Jun knew it.

"Denied."

Tianlang-Jun was undeterred by Mobei's abrupt manner.

"Then I request forgiveness because I'm totally going to move the guest to a spare bedroom."

"Shushu," Mobei warned.

"This palace may belong to your family, little Mobei, but I'm still your guardian. Don't forget that."

Mobei could say nothing back.

Because though he was hopping around in the tiny body of a candlestick, at that moment Tianlang-Jun had spoken like a king.

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Shang Qinghua was glad to be out of the dungeons.

Even so, shivering his way through the icy corridors, led by a *candlestick*, was not how he'd imagined he'd be leaving them.

The candlestick also talked—a great deal actually. Shang Qinghua only half-listened in a daze, until:

"Um, I'm sorry, but what should I call you?"

"You may call me Tianlang-Jun."

"...Tianlang-Jun. D-Did you say something about being human once?"

"All of us were! Before the curse! This way, if you please."

Shang Qinghua nearly slammed into a wall. "A curse?" He chuckled nervously. "By... whom?"

"Good question! All we know is that little Mobei saw a woman in his dream telling him, 'Do this or you'll stay this way forever,' and then we all woke up like this!"

"Little Mobei?"

"Mobei-Jun. The beast?"

(C))

"We're here!" A door slid open. "Get some proper rest; I'll give you a tour in the morning. Sweet dreams~"

Shang Qinghua had no clue what was going on.

Tianlang-Jun hopped inside as soon as Shang Qinghua opened his door the next morning. "I see you're ready; lovely, lovely. Did you like your room?"

"Y-Yes! I-It was-"

"Then let us be on our way! So much to see and so little—"

The sound of someone clearing their throat interrupted him. Tianlang-Jun turned towards a low table. "Yes, my love?"

The bronze incense burner puffed out smoke. "The boy is cold. He needs some furs. *And* breakfast."

"Y-You can also ... talk?" stammered Shang Qinghua, looking at the incense burner.

"Certainly," it said with a bow.

"You just met my wife, Shang-xiansheng: the graceful Su Xiyan."

...Oh, gods.

"Are there... more?" Shang Qinghua glanced around.

Su Xiyan spoke up, "Everyone, you may reveal yourselves."

Instantly, the painted folding screen jumped across the room until it stood in front of him. "So this is him!" a girl's voice exclaimed. "I expected a beauty, my lord—what is the meaning of this?!"

"Don't be like that, Hualing..."

The back of Shang Qinghua's knees hit something solid and he found himself seated on a chair.

"Oh," said the chair, chuckling sheepishly. "Forgive me."

"N-Not at all."

Something knocked into Shang Qinghua's ankles and he squeaked, looking down.

The footrest spoke sinisterly, "Lay your feet on me, and it will be the last thing you do."

A swishing, flapping sound drew Shang Qinghua's gaze to a green fan flicking open in midair. "Hmph. Excellent manners. Is this how you greet guests?"

The footrest's legs bent. "He's Mobei's guest, not mine."

"Is that not because you let Mobei-Jun be the master of you, even though you carry the same title? Or do you only play tough against soft mousy humans?"

"Shizun!"

A knocking sound came from one of the chests, like something was trying to get out. Tianlang-Jun sighed. "Don't be like this. Open up."

The chest popped open and something unfolded from its lip and slithered across the floor. The handscroll crossed the room before spreading open in front of him. Among the beautiful paintings, the snake in the central image bowed its head at him.

The characters framing the painting changed. "Nice to meet you, Shang-xiansheng. This one is Zhuzhi-Lang."

"Well, now you've met everyone!" said Tianlang-Jun. He knocked on a different chest and warm clothes popped out of it and into Shang Qinghua's lap. "Now let us get going! Gongyi Xiao?"

The chair he was sitting on spoke, "Shang-xiansheng, please don't be startled."

Then the chair was moving, walking towards the door on its four legs and taking him along with it; the rest of the animated objects and furniture followed noisily.

Alright. This is happening, thought Shang Qinghua as he let himself be carried off.

"Little Mobei?" called Tianlang-Jun from the door of the secret room later.

"What?" snapped Mobei-Jun.

Su Xiyan cleared her throat from beside him. "You should join Shang-xiansheng for dinner tonight."

"Stop. Meddling."

Tianlang-Jun wanted to pacify him, but another voice cut in. "Enough."

The authority in Su Xiyan's voice made Mobei-Jun tense up.

"Do you intend to stay trapped here forever? I won't allow it—for you, or for Binghe. You *will* have dinner with the human."

Mobei-Jun opened his mouth—

"Or else."

He closed his mouth. "Fine."

"Good," said Su Xiyan, and headed out.

Tianlang-Jun followed her out excitedly. "So, you think Shang Qinghua might be the one?"

"He's cute. And pathetic."

"Pathetic?"

She huffed. "I've learned not to underestimate the power of pathetic men."

"Your guest is here," Su Xiyan announced.

Shang Qinghua hadn't seen the beast since the time he begged him to take Shen Yuan's place. Glaring at her, Mobei-Jun stood and...

... Bowed to Shang Qinghua.

Shang Qinghua almost died from fright.

F-Fuck! If his captor bowed to him, then—then he must bow lower! Lower than low! He must—

Shang Qinghua threw himself to the floor and prostrated. "M-My king! So kind of you to dine with this lowly one!"

...Did I just call him "my king"?!

"'M-My king,' b-because this palace is s-so magnificent that it can only belong to a—"

"Get up and sit down," growled the beast.

Shang Qinghua scrambled up and took a seat. He desperately tried not to stare at the beast's mianguan—what an odd stylistic choice really—that now stood heavily tilted on his head after his bow. And he sure as hell wasn't staring at the edge of something blue on the beast's forehead peeking from underneath the mianguan's rows of beads...

The beast suddenly righted the mianguan on his head, glaring pointedly at Shang Qinghua.

Fuck. He was definitely caught staring.

Su Xiyan cleared her throat and bowed. "I will ask for dinner to be served."

The dishes soon came to break the awkward silence—literally flew in, excitedly spinning and swirling and dancing around the room. Shang Qinghua feared they'd spray everything with food, but with their practiced movements, not a single drop spilled!

When all finally settled, Shang Qinghua applauded. "That was beautiful!"

The dishes shook at the praise—it was adorable!

Though the meal itself was extremely awkward—Shang Qinghua *had* to break the silence!

"The soup is really good! Have you tried it, my king?"

A deadly growl was his response.

"M-M-My king?" he stammered. "D-Did you not like it...?"

Glaring daggers, Mobei-Jun raised the bowl to his mouth... and started lapping at the soup with his tongue.

Shang Qinghua's eyes widened.

He'd been able to eat solid food fairly normally, so he hadn't given much thought to his wolfish snout before. But he could only drink liquids like a dog, which would look utterly humiliating!

And Shang Qinghua had practically forced him to demonstrate it in front of him!

He was fucked.

Luckily, Shang Qinghua was an expert in keeping himself alive.

And the best way to achieve it? By making himself useful!

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One building within the palace had seen better days. With shelves blanketed by dust, its precious contents strewn about like trash, it stayed forgotten for many long years.

And then a man arrived, begging a candlestick and an incense burner to let him put his skills to use. A scholar and book-lover.

On the other side of the palace, a bewildered beast watched a human merrily clean up a library through a handheld mirror.

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It was easier to revive a library with animated furniture on your side. Besides the sweepers and dusters and cleaning rugs, Gongyi Xiao and Zhuzhi-Lang were always willing helpers, and Luo Binghe couldn't be outdone by those two. Shen Qingqiu assured him that he was only there to watch, but he still kept the kids under control.

Sha Hualing... All she did was boss the others around but, well. She was there.

One day, the rowdy library suddenly went awfully quiet as he worked. Shang Qinghua turned to look...

...Only to find Mobei-Jun himself standing there.

"Everyone *out*," he commanded.

Everyone fled. Shang Qinghua too began to follow, but he was stopped.

"Not you."

Of course.

"C-Can I help your excellence?"

"Does Qinghua... like books?"

"E-Eh?" He wasn't expecting that. "Y-Yes, my king!"

"Hn."

When there was no follow-up, Shang Qinghua spoke up, "D-Does my king l-like books?"

"Reading is dull."

"O-Oh..."

Mobei-Jun started grabbing random books from various piles and leafing through them before tossing them away. Finally, he showed him one open book, claw pointing at something.

"I like these."

... The illustrations?!

"O-Oh! Y-You like art, m-my king? Art is truly—"

Mobei-Jun's eyes narrowed menacingly.

Crap.

"Art... can also tell stories!"

"What story does this one tell?"

"Y-You want me...?"

He shut up at the look that Mobei-Jun leveled at him.

"Y-Y-Yes! Of course!"

Shang Qinghua instantly recognized the scene where the Butterfly Lovers flew out of the tomb, and reunited in death. He could just tell that story...

But where was the fun in that?

Instead he improvised a tale about a ghost king that controlled wraith butterflies, which sustained themselves on the flesh of corpses.

Then, Mobei-Jun brought him another book, open to an illustrated page. "What's this one's story?"

Shang Qinghua took the book numbly. He... He really wanted to hear his stories?

Then, how could he refuse?

Shang Qinghua had been on his fifth or sixth story by the time a curt voice resounded in the library.

"Mobei-Jun."

Mobei-Jun glared at the newcomer. "What."

Shen Qingqiu fanned the air delicately. "A guest is here to see you."

Did Mobei-Jun tense up hearing that?

Mobei-Jun followed the fan outside. At the door, though, he turned around and warned Shang Qinghua, "Stay out of sight. Or *else*."

"Yes, my ki-"

"I want to know what happened next with the dragon's egg."

Then he was off.

Who was this guest? Would Mobei-Jun be okay?

Wait. Why would he care?

No, of course he'd care! If his captor feared someone, Shang Qinghua should fear them double!

And so he sneaked towards the main reception hall.

Shang Qinghua slinked through a backdoor like a mouse. A smooth, even voice was speaking: "— certain there was no sign of him?"

Shang Qinghua froze, recognizing the voice.

Emperor Linguang-Jun??!

"I'm certain," said Mobei-Jun. "Perhaps the Cursed Wood took care of him?"

Heart thudding, Shang Qinghua peeked around a folding screen.

"Hmm. I was surprised to see your previous captive return."

"He's learned his lesson already."

"Have you forgotten the importance of hiding your existence? What they'll do to you?"

"He was a smart one. He knows not to speak of this."

Until The Last Petal Falls

Linguang-Jun leaned forward. Though dressed in commoner clothes, his striking looks and the blue birthmark of the imperial dynasty made it evident that this was no ordinary man. "Never let your guard down, Mobei. Ever."

Shang Qinghua had heard enough.

Mobei-Jun was in cahoots with Linguang-Jun. He should get out of this place as soon as possible!

Shang Qinghua was shaken rudely awake in the middle of the night.

"Don't make any noise!" whispered a voice urgently. "Get dressed and let's get out of here!"

Shang Qinghua nearly fainted from relief. Shen Yuan! He really came back for him!

Right outside the room, Liu Qingge, Yue Qingyuan, and Qi Qingqi were all waiting, battle-ready. Without greetings, they headed out.

Everything was going smoothly—way too smoothly. None of the furniture they came across even stirred. Once they reached the woods, the others froze.

"Where did the horses go? Didn't you tie them?!"

"I did!"

"The tracks show that the horses ran back the way we came," intervened Yue Qingyuan. "They'll probably be waiting for us outside the woods."

Shang Qinghua had a bad feeling about this...

"SHANG QINGHUA!"

The deafening roar from the palace made his blood chill.

"Run!" cried Shen Yuan.

All of them took off into the dark woods. Suddenly, a whip-like sound cut through the air and Shang Qinghua fell face-first into the snow, his back burning.

"What are you-?"

Before Shen Yuan could finish his sentence, there was another whistling sound and when Shang Qinghua looked up, there was a bleeding cut on Shen Yuan's arm. An icicle had pierced the ground right where he'd been standing a moment ago.

"Was that -?!"

They didn't have time to talk—a tree was now falling speedily on top of them!

Liu Qingge and Qi Qingqi grabbed Shang Qinghua's hands and pulled him up, narrowly missing being crushed to death. But the attacks just kept on coming—branches, tree trunks, vines, icicles, all launched themselves at their party, their attacks only growing in ferocity!

So this was the true reason why no one had ever left the Cursed Wood alive!

These were some of the empire's best warriors, and even they were barely scraping by. One wrong move and they were dead meat.

Then a vine wrapped around Shang Qinghua's ankle and yanked him to the ground. Before anyone could react, another tree was falling to crush him!

A roar echoed in the forest. The tree exploded before it reached him.

Shang Qinghua was shaking. W-What had happened?

The majestic height of Mobei-Jun loomed over him. And with bare hands, he stopped every branch, every ice crystal, every rock aimed Shang Qinghua's way!

Wh-Why...?

"Qinghua!" A hand pulled him to his feet. "Let's go!"

"QINGHUA!" roared Mobei-Jun. Shang Qinghua looked over his shoulder as he was being pulled away and saw him getting overwhelmed by the forest as it focused all of its attacks on him.

And before he knew it, they were outside the boundary of the Cursed Wood, making their way to where the horses were waiting for them.

Behind him, he could still hear Mobei-Jun's roars and howls as he fought.

Shang Qinghua's hand was pulled harder. "Come on!" urged Shen Yuan.

Only then did Shang Qinghua realize he had stopped walking.

A dangerous thought took root in his mind.

All these rescuers of his were only here for Shen Yuan—but Mobei-Jun, for whatever reason, was here for Shang Qinghua, and him alone.

...Dammit.

"Qinghua!" barked Qi Qingqi. "Get mo-"

"Sooo ... I gotta go back."

"This is no time for jokes!" yelled Liu Qingge.

Yue Qingyuan cut in, "Qinghua, what is the meaning of this?"

"Th-The beast! He's got a connection with Linguang-Jun. I—I could collect intel!"

"You—what the fuck are you talking about?!" Shen Yuan looked at him like he had grown two heads—all of them did.

"Just... trust me on this, okay?"

And before anyone could stop him, he took off back into the Cursed Wood.

Shang Qinghua ran back into the woods that wanted to whack him dead without a plan.

But he had an idea.

Until The Last Petal Falls

"I'M COMING BACK!" he shouted as the forest reared back to attack again. "YOU CAN STOP—I'M NOT LEAVING ANYMORE!"

Everything went still again. Only the wind still howled.

He ran as fast as he could, until—

Something big lay fallen on the snow—snow stained red.

"My king!" He kneeled beside the fallen beast. He couldn't be dead, right?!

"Why..." Weakly, the enormous body on the ground stirred, turning his head to look at him. "Why are you back?"

Shang Qinghua chuckled sheepishly. "I just realized—I still haven't finished the story of the princess and the dragon's egg."

"You-" He suddenly flinched, a doggish whine leaving his throat.

"You're hurt. We can talk later."

With difficulty, he pulled Mobei-Jun up and carried



him back to the palace.

unsaid.

Thus, man and beast returned to the palace together. Yet, there was still distance to be crossed, much left

The man reached out first. The beast was wounded, and refused to be treated. The man, however, soldiered on.

"What would this king desire in exchange?"

The beast asked for a story.

One story turned into two, and two into five. Day after day, the beast returned to the library. And with an eager listening ear, the man's stories took wings.

Hard work always pays off, and soon a dusty, forgotten library found its former glory. Objects and furniture big and small came to admire the man's achievement. Who knew underneath all the dust and crust, such wonders lingered?

There must be a celebration, they decided. In a flurry of excitement, the preparations for a great banquet began.

Only one man was unaffected by the excitement.

The clean library felt too quiet, too lonely, without the incessant retelling of magical stories. But that required an audience, and the beast had stopped visiting.

Tianlang-Jun announced himself just as Shang Oinghua was about to leave for the banquet.

"Oh! Can I help you with something?"

"A gentleman would like to accompany Shangxiansheng to the banquet hall. Does he have your permission?"

"O-Of course! I would be deli-ghted..."

His mind went blank when he saw Mobei-Jun himself walk in!

"Have you changed your mind about me accompanying you?"

Well, there was only one correct response.

"O-Of course not, my king! I-I would be honored!"

Mobei-Jun then did something unthinkable. He offered his arm to Shang Qinghua.

Blankly, Shang Qinghua took it and they headed to the banquet hall.

For such a small gathering, it was truly decked out with outstanding glamor. Not even at royal banquets had Shang Qinghua seen such magnificent ice sculptures!

"Beautiful," he breathed. "Who might the talented artist be?"

Mobei-Jun grunted and looked away.

...M-Mobei-Jun?

Was *that* the reason he did not visit him lately? Because he was too busy sculpting these?!

Soon the dishes swept inside. Once again, they put on an entire performance as they swirled and danced around the room—a much grander and more sophisticated one. Musical instruments filled the hall with melodies, and furniture took the role of dancers.

Shang Qinghua was dazzled.

And the food! It was all so good, he wanted to cry.

At some point, Tianlang-Jun proposed a toast.

"We haven't had an occasion to celebrate in so long!" he began, a cup of fine wine floating around him. "Day in, day out, it was always the same...but finally, a fresh face has joined our ranks!"

Everyone cheered, and Shang Qinghua felt his smile freeze.

Was he talking about him?!

"And this dear guest has labored hard to revive our library! So now we honor him with this humble celebration! And finally, our little Mobei would also like to show his appreciation by gifting the library to the man that revived it!"

Then, the cup of wine overturned over Tianlang-Jun, the alcohol causing his flame to flare and hiss, and the hall filled with cheers.

Shang Qinghua just sat there, gobsmacked.

...Gifting WHAT to WHOM?!

What was happening?!

"Qinghua."

Shang Qinghua snapped back to the present. Mobei-Jun had stood up from the table and was now looking at him. "I'm going for a walk."

He said no more, but his arm was once again offered expectantly.

A mix of emotions clogged Shang Qinghua's throat.

A part of him wanted to assume it was all a trap—that the rug would soon be pulled out from under his feet

But who cared! He would enjoy this to the last!

Feeling slightly delirious, he took that arm.

The sky was clear that night, and the stars were so bright. Even the cold wind was somehow softer. Shang Qinghua watched the glimmer of the moonlight on the snow that crunched under their feet and felt at peace.

"The snow..." he said, quietly. "It's not that bad, actually..."

A gentle wind threaded its fingers through Shang Qinghua's hair. It gave him courage.

He began to babble about how much he hated the heat and running errands while sweating. He was here, with Mobei-Jun, who always listened, and that was all that mattered.

The air suddenly turned frigid, and Shang Qinghua unconsciously burrowed closer to Mobei-Jun.

"Would you return?"

Shang Qinghua blinked in confusion. "E-Eh?"

"Your old life. Would you return to it?"

"No. Why would I?"

He had that option. He'd made his choice, and he hadn't done it lightly. Tonight—tonight something had settled in him.

Mobei-Jun stopped walking, and he stopped with him. Did Mobei-Jun look...angry?

"So there's nothing in the outside world you'd miss?"

"I said I wouldn't!"

"Nothing at all?"

"What's with you? Do you want me to go back?"

So, maybe it was a bad idea to argue with a dangerous beast that could tear him in half with a snap of his jaws, but now he was angry too! He basically told him that he'd never leave his side, and this was his reaction?!

"You didn't answer the question."

"I guess I'd like to know if my friends are alright. So there's that!"

"That's all?"

"Yes!"

An enormous hand grabbed his much smaller, mitten-wrapped one, and he found himself being dragged towards the inner halls. "Come with me."

Shang Qinghua had the feeling that he shouldn't be there.

ed the e was The chambers were a depressing mess, with claw marks marking the walls and surfaces. And then, there was the magic flower.

On top of a table, a glass case protected a delicate crystal rose that emitted an ethereal glow. It would have been the most beautiful sight, but only a miserable handful of petals still clung to the stem, the rest scattered around its base.

"Come here."

Mobei-Jun offered him a gilded handheld mirror. "You said you wished to know if your friends are safe. The mirror is magic. Think of them, and they shall appear."

That lump of emotions settled in Shang Qinghua's throat again, aching.

...What is this reality where I ask for something, and it's just offered to me?

He looked down at the mirror, and thought of Shen Yuan.

The reflection on the mirror changed. He was no longer looking at his own face, but Shen Yuan's.

He was alive. But, as for being safe...

"Those are the dungeons," he whispered. Then, he thought of Yue Qingyuan. Of Liu Qingge, Qi Qingqi, Mu Qingfang...

"Linguang-Jun got them."

Shang Qinghua didn't realize he'd said that out loud until he felt the room's temperature drop.

He should have never asked to check on them. It wasn't like he could do anything about it! He just strained his relationship with Mobei-Jun for no reason!

He should just figure out a way for them to forget about this—

Who am I fooling? He wanted to cry. Damn you, Shen Yuan! Damn you all! I should just leave you all to rot in there!

"Thank you, my king." He offered the mirror back. "I found out what I needed to know."

Mobei-Jun didn't take it. "What will you do?"

"Technically, I don't owe anyone anything. Shenxiong and I are even..."

"You're going back."

It wasn't a question.

"Come with me."

Mobei-Jun stilled.

"What?" he snarled, so low, it turned Shang Qinghua's blood to ice.

He might as well go all the way now!

"Why should Linguang-Jun be out there, leading your empire, while you are trapped here?"

There. He said it.

"My empire?" thundered Mobei-Jun.

"I know, alright? I'm not that big of a fool." Shang Qinghua took a deep breath. "I know that you are the missing heir to the throne. The name fits, the timeline fits... And... your mianguan may have fallen from your head when you got injured in the Cursed Wood..."

Mobei-Jun's eyes blew open wide.

But honestly, using the beaded veil of a mianguan to hide the birthmark of the Mobei dynasty on his forehead! It was the worst idea ever, and simultaneously genius. Who other than an eccentric beast would wear the ceremonial headdress of an emperor?! If it hadn't been for Linguang-Jun's visit, or seeing Mobei-Jun's birthmark, or three of his attendants bearing the names of another kingdom's missing royalty, Shang Qinghua never would have made the connection!

(It must have been Tianlang-Jun's idea. Only he could come up with this.)

"And what do you want me to do?"

"You are the rightful heir to the throne. Linguang-Jun usurped it from you!"

"My uncle took over because I am cursed. Look at me."

"I am looking."

Mobei-Jun didn't know how to respond to this. In

the end, he turned his back to him and said coldly, "Go."

"My king-"

"Just go!" roared Mobei-Jun, clawed hand snapped out to attack.

Shang Qinghua flinched back unintentionally. Mobei-Jun turned back around and said, "Take the mirror with you. I have no need for it."

Shang Qinghua's fists clenched. Then, he walked out of the room.

And so the man boarded the carriage offered to him and took off into the night. He knew what to do.

He took out the magic mirror. "Show me the day my king was turned into a beast."

The mirror showed him a strange story.

Of a rowdy royal family and its retinue accompanying a little prince with a blue birthmark outside to cheer him up. Of the little prince being snatched by thugs in the busy market and taken into an alleyway.

And then, of an older mousy boy hitting one of the thugs with his slingshot, giving the little prince the chance to run.

The two ran together and lost their pursuers in the crowd.

But when the little prince refused to be taken back to his guardians, the mousy boy knew not what to do.

"No one cares for me!" yelled the little prince. "Everyone just leaves!"

The mousy boy looked around for something to help him. His eyes landed on a beautiful white rose that still bloomed in the late autumn.

"Do you know the story about this flower?"

He weaved a story then, about an eternal winter and a lone, hardy flower blessed by a goddess so it could grant the wishes of mortals and bring back the warmth of spring to their hearts. The little prince listened to every word. Then, he demanded the rose. Eyes clenched shut, he wished hard.

The man in the carriage knew the rest of the story. How the little prince, pacified by the rose, allowed the mousy boy to lead him to his guardians. How the mousy boy, seeing the important-looking family from afar, felt scared and asked the little prince to continue alone.

He remembered well the hurt in the little prince's eyes when he yelled, "You're just like everyone else!" and ran to his quardians.

Not long after, the Huan Hua Kingdom learned of the disappearance of the entire royal family. In the Northern Kingdom, the mousy boy heard of another disappearance—that of the young prince of the Mobei dynasty.

Now all the pieces of the puzzle were slotting into place, and the man in the carriage came up with a plan.

Linguang-Jun looked down at him from his throne coldly.

"It is, of course, a great relief to see you returned. But your absence raises a lot of questions. Would you care to explain your whereabouts?"

Shang Qinghua bowed deep. "As Your Highness desires. But... perhaps Your Highness might prefer to discuss this privately?"

Linguang-Jun looked amused. "Oh? Why would I?"

Shang Qinghua shuddered—but when their eyes met, his gaze was steady. "Because the horrors of the Cursed Wood might not be suited for all ears."

One beat of silence. Then...

"Everyone out. I am going to have a talk with Shang-xiansheng in private."

Murmurs accompanied the shuffling of people towards the doors, and then the two of them were alone in the room.

"Now speak," said Linguang-Jun. "Why shouldn't I kill you right now?"

"Because I can help you cut off a certain loose end."

"And how would you do that?"

"I'm good at acting like a pathetic victim. If your people find out that a vicious beast is hurting civilians, won't they want to eradicate it?"

Linguang-Jun looked intrigued. "Only if they believe you. They're more likely to believe you've lost your wits."

"But I have proof." Seeing the magic mirror he took out from his lapels, Linguang-Jun's eyes lit up with recognition.

"How did you get that?"

"Mobei-Jun himself gave it to me."

"Why?" Linguang-Jun's eyes narrowed into slits. "And how did you escape in the first place?"

"Would Your Highness believe me if I said that he was foolish enough to fall for me?" He laughed, and it felt like barfing up broken glass. "He was so starved for affection, even a bit of common subservience was enough to win his devotion. He let me go himself."

Forgive me, my king!

"I don't know why I'm surprised. And what are you hoping to gain?"

"Nothing but Your Worship's favor. I was foolish and believed that, with Yue Qingyuan in the lead, the rebels stood a chance, but your overwhelming power proved me wrong. I would wish for nothing more but to serve you again."

"If this goes well and there are no signs of foul play, I may forgive that lapse of judgment. If not, though..."

Shang Qinghua smiled. "Understood."

Even Shang Qinghua was surprised with how easily the imperial court was convinced, and how quickly Linguang-Jun's army reacted. He didn't expect to be on his way back to the ice palace so soon. Leading an enemy army right on Mobei-Jun's doorstep.

"Th-This way..." He pointed right at the junction with a shaky hand, where the first signs of winter could already be seen. "This path leads straight to the beast."

Linguang-Jun nodded sharply at his generals and they all set out into the Cursed Wood. The vanguard had crossed two thirds of the woods by the time Linguang-Jun spoke up again.

"No funny business just yet. You might actually be telling the truth."

"Why would I lie? It would only result in you amassing your glorious army. Who could be a match for it?"

Seeing the truth in his words, the corner of Linguang-Jun's lips curved.

"Indeed, an army so vast and well-trained... Only the rage of nature could rival it!"

Shang Qinghua suddenly pulled the reins of his horse and yelled at the top of his lungs,

"THESE INTRUDERS MEAN TO HARM YOUR MASTER. PROTECT HIM—"

Wicked metal flashed straight towards his neck from Linguang-Jun's direction. Shang Qinghua was expecting it though and flung himself off his horse just in time.

Instead of crashing onto the snow, *something* curled around his limbs and caught him midair, breaking his fall. Then it was raising him up in the air, away from Linguang-Jun's reach.

Vines, he realized. The woods saved me.

As more vines circled his wrists and began to pass him around, helping him cross the woods from above, he could finally see the carnage that had broken out in the meantime.

And it truly was carnage.

This was the wood at its most violent—crushing, piercing, squeezing, thrashing. Linguang-Jun's army never stood a chance.

The screams followed him all the way out of the woods. After the vines put him gently down at

the edge, he whispered a thank you and took off towards the tall, heavy gates of the ice palace.

His hurried footfalls echoed in the quiet courtyards. Some objects here and there heard him and stirred, like awakening from a dream.

"Sh-Shang-xiansheng?"

"It's him!"

"He's back!"

"Everyone, he's back!"

Shang Qinghua wanted to laugh, to cry, to say how good it was to be home... But this wasn't the time.

"Enemies might try to enter the palace and kill your master!" he cried. "Stop anyone who enters from getting to Mobei-Jun!"

No one would be able to break through the joint forces of the Cursed Wood *and* the furniture.

With that taken care of, he headed straight for Mobei-Jun's private courtyard and the secret room.

Gloom. That was what was waiting for him in the secret room.

Moth-eaten curtains blocked out most of the daylight, and only through the light of the crystal rose could he see the mess inside—in a bigger disarray than before. Furniture—hopefully no one he knew—lay in pieces, claw marks marred the walls, glass shards glinted on the floor. But even that light was weak, one single petal barely hanging onto the stem.

But the huge, hunched form on the other side of the room was even more pitiful to look at. Shang Qinghua's heart clenched seeing the defeated slump of those shoulders.

"My king!"

Slowly—so painfully slowly—Mobei-Jun turned around.

Shang Qinghua swallowed and forged ahead. "A

long time ago, a boy that saved you from a bunch of thugs gave you a rose and told you that it could grant wishes. Do you remember what you wished for that day?"

"You...What are you doing here?"

"Did you ask for the power to keep others from leaving you?"

Mobei-Jun seemed too shocked or too furious to answer.

But Shang Qinghua didn't need him to.

"Don't you see? My king—this isn't a curse! This was a blessing! I don't know how, but that rose truly had powers, and it granted you your wish! All this"—he gestured around— "this is your doing! You did this with your own power!"

Mobei-Jun stepped back. "Are you insane?!"

"No one here can leave. Just like you wanted. And if they try to leave without your permission, the Cursed Wood will take care of them for you. And your beast form! You—You know why I saved you back then? You fought and kicked and bit those thugs to escape, but you didn't scream once. You never thought for a second that anyone would help you. But in this form, who would dare harm you? You became the master of your own fate! You made it happen for you!"

Mobei-Jun retreated deeper and deeper into the chamber, eyes widening more and more. He *believed* Shang Qinghua, but he was horrified at the prospect of him being right.

Shang Qinghua stepped forward tentatively. "Do you understand what this means, my king? You can break the spell and give up these powers if you wish... or you can keep them. It's your choice."

"What?" Mobei-Jun seemed caught between horror and anger. "Why on *earth* would I want to keep these powers? Have you seen the misery they sowed?"

"Misery?! Linguang-Jun was going to have you killed! And then he'd blame it on Tianlang-Jun and Su Xiyan who had you in their care at the time! These powers are the only thing that kept you and everyone alive long enough so that I could meet you! And I'm never going to leave. Powers or no powers, you can never make me leave again! So don't you dare say that your powers only caused misery—"

Mobei-Jun was staring at him, looking shaken to the core. Suddenly, though, he snarled through his teeth and leaped towards him. "Qinghua—"

He froze as suddenly as he jumped into action. At the same time, metal glinted at the side of Shang Qinghua's throat.

Oh, fuck.

"Yes, that's right," purred a voice close to Shang Qinghua's ear that made his blood turn to ice. "No sudden moves, Mobei. Or his neck will get split open."

Mobei-Jun growled deep in his throat, but he stayed still, watching the knife that shook at Shang Qinghua's throat.

How the fuck did Linguang-Jun escape the Cursed Wood? *And* the furniture—

Oh, he'd been so stupid! The furniture didn't know that Linguang-Jun was a threat! They probably assumed he had come to help fend off the enemy! Probably even the Cursed Wood had been fooled!

"Now," said Linguang-Jun, "do as I say. Shatter the crystal rose."

"My king—don't!"

Mobei-Jun closed his fist around the rose with a muffled cracking sound, and dust streamed through the cracks of his fingers. The darkness thickened in the room.

"Now let him go."

Linguang-Jun scoffed. "I will...after you do one last thing for me."

"What?"

"Take your own life."

"My king, don't you dare—"

But Mobei-Jun was already bending down, shuffling through the glass shards on the floor for one that could do the job.

"Oh, he will dare," said Linguang-Jun. "And how fitting it will be. Because of his father, I lost my beloved, and now, because of me, he won't get to be with the one *he* loves. Couldn't have arranged it better myself."

Revenge??! This was what this had all been about?

And what did Mobei-Jun have to do with his father stealing his woman?!

Shang Qinghua wanted to scream how ridiculous this was. And how, for all of Linguang-Jun's apparent confidence, the knife at his throat was still shaking...

Wait a moment.

The knife was shaking...but Linguang-Jun's hand was not.

Just as Mobei-Jun finally found a big glass shard, Shang Qinghua said, "Um, Your Highness?"

"What?" snapped Linguang-Jun.

"Where exactly did you get this knife?"

"Huh?"

Before anyone could react, Shang Qinghua threw himself straight at the knife.

"Qinghua!" cried Mobei-Jun as Linguang-Jun's hold on him slackened in surprise at this suicidal act.

But the knife, in its panic, flew right out of Linguang-Jun's hand before it could cut him, so Shang Qinghua simply landed on his hands and knees, unharmed.

"Now!" he then yelled at the still-disoriented knife, spurring it into action.

Linguang-Jun barely had the time to let out a choked breath before the knife sunk into his heart.

It's over. Shang Qinghua wanted to curl up on the floor and cry from relief, or laugh hysterically. We've killed the Emperor!

The knife seemed less happy as it removed itself from Linguang-jun's chest and flew away in a panic, leaving Linguang-Jun to slump on the floor and bleed out. Poor fellow.

"Qinghua!" A huge figure leaned over him; white fur gleamed in the dim light. "Are you alright?"

"Am I alr—Am I alright?!" Just like that, the urge to cry from relief turned to an urge to cry from anger. "Are you crazy?! What were you thinking?! You were just going to let him have his way? Do you have no self-preservation inst—"

The words were squeezed out of his lungs as he was enveloped in the biggest, warmest embrace, and pressed against that big, strong chest, Shang Qinghua finally let the tears fall.

"Stupid... Mobei..."

It was good to be home.

... Why was Mobei-Jun beginning to glow?

Shang Qinghua pulled back, alarmed. "Uhh, my king?!"

Mobei-Jun just smiled as he was pulled off from his arms by a mysterious force. And then the glow bathed him whole.

Shang Qinghua didn't know what to do! Was this a good thing? Was this a bad thing? Was his king dying inside that light?! Finally the light began to dim once more and the outline of a figure began to become visible... A much *smaller* figure, though still quite tall and broad.

... A human figure.

Shang Qinghua gasped and sprang forward, catching Mobei-Jun as he was lowered onto the ground again.

"M-My king!"

The glow now was completely absorbed into Mobei-Jun's transformed body, and Shang Qinghua could finally see him...

... And he now wished he didn't.

Because the person he was holding right now was, even in his too-big robes, the most beautiful man he had ever set eyes upon. His heart couldn't take it!

"Qinghua?" said the man in front of him.

"Y-Y-Yes?" Was his face as hot as it felt?

A pale hand cupped his cheek. "Did you mean what you said?"

"About wh-wh-what?"

"About never leaving again."

"Oh. That."

Mobei-Jun's face leaned even closer and Shang

Qinghua let out an *eep!*. "If you try to leave again," he said lowly, "I will turn back into a beast and hunt you down wherever you go."

Shang Qinghua's knees gave out.

Until The Last Petal Falls

He was caught before he fell on the floor, and then two persistent lips were enveloping his own. His brain melted into a puddle of goo.

Have I ascended? he wondered in bliss, closing his eyes and letting his lips go pliant under the force of the bruising kiss.

Beyond their bubble, the icy walls of the palace melted back into their former shape. Objects and furniture yelped in surprise when they felt a bit strange, and then, *pop!* They were human again! The harsh winds mellowed, the snow and ice melted, and green leaves and blooms filled the grounds and woods.

Spring had returned. And there were birthrights and kingdoms and empires to claim back, friends to see again, explanations to be given...

But for now, Mobei-Jun and Shang Qinghua could enjoy their small moment of happily ever after in each other's arms.

Home at last.

There once lived a woman in the Northern Kingdom, as beautiful and wise as she was unlucky. Loved by one brother and conquered by another, her only comfort was her son, a white rosebud with black silky hair and bright blue eyes.

And as she bled out her life, her only thoughts were of her boy—her only wish for him never to know the same heartbreaks, for him to see the other side of winter, where the warmth of spring lay.

That night, somewhere far away, the seed of a white rose came to life. It would last through the chilling winter, never cowing to its frigid winds, until two warm hands would come to pluck it from the earth and offer it to another. A young boy with hands cold as ice.

People always leave, or they hurt me! the boy's aura screamed. Give me the power to keep them by my

Until The Last Petal Falls

side forever! And if they try anything, to hurt them back!

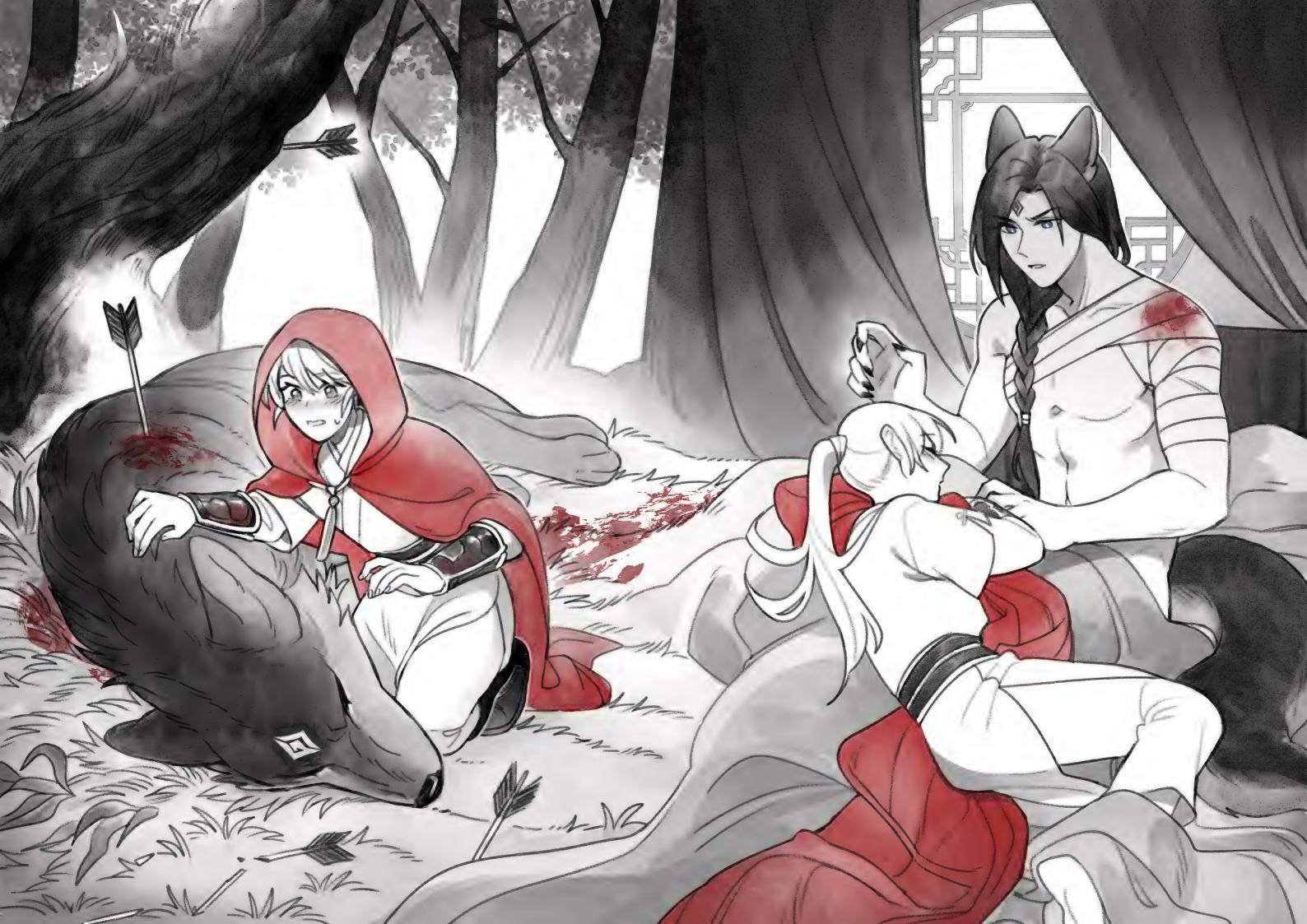
That night, the rose's spirit embraced the boy in his sleep, sliding into his dreams.

"You have been hurt a lot, dear son," it said to him. "I can give you the power you seek. It may be more of a curse than a blessing, however. Use it to find the strength to love and be loved again, and when you do, you can let these powers go. But be warned—if you don't find what you seek before my last petal falls, the effect will be permanent."

The boy woke up in the form of a fearsome beast, in a palace made of ice. All he knew was that this would be his forever, unless he found someone to love and be loved in return. But who could love a beast?

Somewhere far away, another boy wove stories and learned to survive; and while people claimed you could not love a monster, it was a lesson he'd been far too busy to learn.





WHERE THE SUN SLEEPS

Rating:

General Audiences

Relationships

Mobei Jun x Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua, Linguang-Jun, Luo Binghe, Sha Hualing, Liu Qingge, Liu Mingyan, Shen Qinggiu

We're going on an adventure, fairytale, missing sun, royals, fluff

Summary

Every day the sun would travel across the sky and every night it would disappear. Mobei-Jun, Crown Prince of the Northern Kingdom, never gave it much thought. Until the month of his coronation when it failed to rise. The black sky is considered an ill omen, and if he is to take his rightful place upon the throne, he must find out why. His only lead comes from Shang Qinghua, a young man who claims he knows where the sun sleeps and promises to lead the prince there. As they set out on their adventure, it becomes clear that there is more to his guide than he first thought. Especially when everything seems just a bit brighter when Shang Qinghua smiles.

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FORGOTTENVICE

Beta:

Illustrated by:

K-Noppa

K-NOPPA

Mobei-Jun was destined to be King.

He'd been born to the role, Crown Prince of the North since his first cry. His education had been directed accordingly, instruction in the art of politics, war, and defence of his kingdom from outside nations and traitors alike.

His father taught him how to use his position as a weapon, emphasizing his status and control.

Such lessons continued even after his Father's death with new teachers; treachery and bitter experience. His uncle, Linguang-Jun, had taken over as regent and in doing so left the prince to pick his battles and bide his time.

The late king's brother had been lauded for stepping up, but it was clear to the young prince that the man had only done so to tighten his grip on power. Often citing Mobei-Jun's youth and inexperience to deny him his place on the throne.

But such a poor excuse was not to last past the prince's twenty-first birthday, the day of his official coronation.

A day that approached quickly.

Mobei-Jun had been patient, and soon that patience would pay off. The planning had gone smoothly and there was an undercurrent of excitement running through the staff as the preparations began in earnest.

It was to be a season-long affair, starting with an influx of visitors to the Capital. Travellers from far and wide would pour into the city: dignitaries, merchants and of course, the common people. All would join the celebrations until the day he was to take his birthright.

The young prince had grown into a stoic man, holding his emotions close so they could not be used against him, but even he could not resist smiling with anticipation, everything was going to work out exactly as it was supposed to.

Until it didn't.

The first day of celebration began as any other, Mobei-Jun's first action of the day was to pull back his curtains and greet the sun, but when he did, only the cool starry sky of night met his salutation.

Perhaps he was early, excitement pushing his awakening up by an hour or two, but when he found the castle staff in a panic, it was clear that that had not been the case.

Dark days were not unheard of; poor weather, or smoke from summer fires had blocked out the sun on occasion, but even then it would shine a blood red behind the smoke and clouds.

The starry sky was clear, pinpricks of light twinkling merrily as if the night was never meant to end.

Servants were told to continue their duties, even while uncertainty stained every step. Mobei-Jun went immediately to consult the royal scholars. The astronomers had not predicted any such eclipse, but still they assured the prince the sun should return by the next morn.

The opening ceremony continued as planned, and Mobei-Jun relayed the scholar's predictions to his people, allowing the festivities to begin as if nothing was amiss.

But when he greeted the second dawn of darkness, Mobei-Jun had a sinking feeling settle in his gut. One that the people seemed to share, more had gathered in the palace

courtyard, not for revelry, but for answers.

A tense uneasiness filled the city streets, tallow and pitch could act as remedy for a day, but what of longer?

The travellers flooding the capital switched from cheerful partygoers to fearful refugees, driven to worry without the daylight they had once taken for granted. A single question passed every set of lips.

Where had the sun gone?

There were no good theories and even bringing scholars to face the crowd provided no reassurance. As the second sunless day rolled into a third, Mobei-Jun saw his fragile hope vanish alongside the missing sun.

People had gathered on the palace grounds once again demanding answers.

Mobei-Jun had none.

He stood above the crowd upon the palatial balcony, a place from which the Northern Kings had addressed their subjects for centuries, now it was only a vantage point from which to watch their faith in his leadership crumble. Fear and uncertainty were thrown into flickering relief by the lamps and torches amongst the crowd.

He was to be King, but he was lost, feeling more like a scapegoat than a ruler. This was no foe to be conquered, no traitor to be hung, he was woefully unprepared to placate the turbulent crowd.

Before he could conjure answers, his uncle appeared next to him with a mysterious robed figure.

"Please listen."

Linguang-Jun was a charismatic speaker in a way Mobei-Jun could never replicate. His voice projected over the crowd, silencing their complaints with camaraderie and a pull to hear his next words.

"The sages have been consulted." He then stepped to the side, letting the cloaked man face the people.

"It is an ill omen to spend a day with black sky, and we have suffered three. The gods are angry, if we do not placate their wrath it will bring our lands to ruin." The man looked pointedly at Mobei-Jun.

The prince bristled, clenching his teeth and glaring at his uncle. Linguang-Jun had raised his hands to the crowd in a parody of comfort.

"No one is more disappointed by this omen than myself, but perhaps in a few years the fates will show the crown prince favour once more. I shall continue on as regent until they do."

His false sincerity had cold fury surging through Mobei-Jun's veins.

"We cannot ignore the signs nephew, this is the will of the gods," Of course Linguan Jun was only a religious man when it suited him.

"Unless you can personally bring back the sun, what else can be done?"

Silence had overtaken the crowd and Mobei-Jun could feel everything he'd worked for slipping from his grasp.

"Then I'll do it."

Linguang-Jun frowned, but Mobei-Jun mirrored his actions, turning to the crowd.

"I, Mobei-Jun, Crown Prince of the Northern Kingdom, vow to find the sun and return it to the sky." Adrenaline chose his words, steeling his nerves as he challenged his uncle.

"And I will do so *before* my coronation, to earn back the god's favour and remove all doubts to my place as king."

The words hung over the silent crowd as heavily as his intent, after a moment, his declaration was met with a raucous cheer, and he felt grimly satisfied at the way his uncle frowned.

It was a short lived satisfaction. It took less than an hour to realize the flaw in his plan:

He had no idea where to start.

He couldn't guess as to why the sun had gone. Had he truly lost the god's favour?

He'd never been particularly devout, but the prospect of losing the power he'd worked for hadn't given him the chance to consider the feasibility of his quest.

He'd consulted the scholars, the astronomers, and even the treacherous sages, but none had answers. The sickly sweet smile his uncle had given him when he'd left their consultation let him know that Linguang-Jun had reached the same conclusion.

Mobei-Jun wandered the castle, his thoughts spiralling, grasping for impossible solutions as the darkness of the last few days began to suffocate him.

His rumination was broken by a timid voice.

"M-My King?"

He stilled, turning to find an unfamiliar man at his side.

The unassuming man fidgeted beneath his gaze, it was clear he did not belong in the palace—neither a servant nor guard, but too

plainly dressed to be a visiting ambassador or dignitary.

Mobei-Jun towered above most people, but the man seemed even shorter the way he was cowering. Most visitors were at least polite enough to gawk at royalty from a distance.

"What are you doing here?" The man tensed, his shoulders rising as a guilty look crossed his face. He dropped to his knees prostrating.

"Apologies, my King, apologies. This serva—"

"Prince."

"What?" The man blinked at him owlishly, the expression made him look foolish.

"I am no king yet, it is improper to address me as such." He didn't need to give his uncle more reason to condemn him.

"Oh." Dark eyes widened in understanding and the man stilled just long enough for Mobei-Jun to inspect him. His robes were plain, but the style was complex, a design unfamiliar to the prince. The colour was a muddy yellow, reflecting the torchlight in a way that still managed to make the dark hall seem brighter.

"What are you doing here?" The man flinched under inspection, only remembering himself after a moment.

"Right! I'm here about the sun!" He scrambled for words, "I-I know where it—where you can find it!"

That grabbed Mobei-Jun's attention, he'd gotten nowhere with scholars and sages.

"Tell me."

"Well-I-uh,"



The man nodded rapidly.

"It descends to the earth every night to sleep among the mountains."

He eyed the cowering man trying to gauge a motive. His conviction was commendable; more powerful men had fled under the scrutiny of the Crown Prince. In the end that conviction, and his lack of options, convinced Mobei-Jun.

"What is your name?"

"Shang Qinghua, my Ki-er my Prince."

"Then Shang Qinghua, you will take me to this cave."

Shang Qinghua's head whipped up to meet the prince's eyes, they seemed brighter than before, torchlight reflecting gold only for a moment. Then Shang Qinghua's forehead was pressed to the ground once more.

"Of course, my King."

They left the castle immediately, Mobei-Jun wasn't going to give his uncle the chance to interfere. Shang Qinghua seemed to know hidden routes throughout the city, in the darkness they easily left unnoticed.

As promised, Shang Qinghua led him north, paved roads gave way to earthen paths that would lead them into the wildwood and eventually the mountains beyond.

Despite being a part of his kingdom, the land was unfamiliar to Mobei-Jun. Without sunlight to guide them there was a foreboding sense of walking into an abyss, the only light daring to shine above them were mere pinpricks, stars hardly bright enough to illuminate the path.

Shang Qinghua however appeared unfettered by the darkness, even when it was Mobei-Jun who held their single lantern, the man deduced their direction with ease.

Travelling with Shang Qinghua was unusual, different from what he was accustomed to.

Mobei-Jun was a quiet man, he spent much of his days in silence. A King's words were supposed to hold weight, so he used them sparingly.

Shang Qinghua had no such reservations.

The moment they were out of earshot of the palace he began talking. At first he explained their route, then he described their destination before asking questions. When Mobei-Jun didn't answer, he made up his own.

He rambled about anything and everything, perhaps just to fill the silence, or maybe he was simply used to keeping his own company.

Usually Mobei-Jun preferred silence, but the constant chatter made it feel like an afternoon stroll rather than a dangerous quest. The time passed easier especially when the only other gauge was the oil consumed by their lantern.

The temperature gradually lowered as they went, most notably when settling down for the night. Mobei-Jun had a heavy cloak to protect him from the chill, but Shang Qinghua had only thin robes.

An odd feeling plagued the prince as he watched the smaller man curl up in an attempt to sleep, one that didn't go away until he found himself next to the man

draping his cloak over them both.

"Oh! Thank you, my King!" despite the way the moniker warmed Mobei-Jun, he still found himself correcting,

"Not a king, yet."

By the evening of the third day, they came across a quaint but isolated cabin deep in the woods. The windows were dark, and the wood old, still it was sturdy enough to provide a warmer place to sleep than the ground.

Shang Qinghua knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" Mobei-Jun was a little surprised to hear a child's voice answer.

"Travellers, looking for a place to stay the night." They could hear scuffling behind the door, but it remained closed.

"We'll pay for lodging." At those words, the door cracked open and a small head peeked out from behind, it was a young boy giving them an appraising glance.

"Give us your cloak." A thin arm snaked out from behind the boy to point at Mobei-Jun.

Shang Qinghua stepped between the offending finger and the prince.

"Ah, wouldn't you prefer gold?"

An even smaller voice called out from behind the boy.

"Gold won't stop us freezing to death." The boy pushed someone behind him before returning his glare to Shang Qinghua. The man was taken aback by the statement, looking back at Mobei-Jun before glancing back at the boy.

"Wha-What do you mean you'll freeze?"

"How are we supposed to warm up without the sun?" A small pigtailed head popped out from behind the boy.

"Even inside it's cold!" the little girl insisted. Mobei-Jun could see her shiver under several layers of threadbare clothing. The boy, despite his bravado, was also affected by the chill.

Shang Qinghua seemed shocked by the statement, rendered speechless for the first time on their journey. Mobei-Jun just quietly removed his cloak and held it out to the children. He could endure the cold, and it would be nice to have a safe place to rest.

The boy was named Luo Binghe and the girl was Sha Hualing, by the look of the lonely gravestone out behind the cabin, the two were orphans.

Mobei-Jun and Shang Qinghua settled on one side of the room while the children huddled beneath the cloak on the other.

The prince did not sleep well, as the night wore on the chill increased, and it was clear from watching that even his warm fur cloak was not enough. He began to feel guilty that they would leave the children with nothing better.

"Is there nothing else we can do?" Shang Qinghua was plagued with the same sleeplessness whispering his concerns, "A cloak is barely adequate, don't people light fires for heat?"

Usually they would, but looking around the small cabin, Mobei-Jun understood why the children had not. The whole cabin was built from wood, highly flammable.

It had already been so cold barely a few days since the sun's disappearance. If Mobei-Jun took too long, or if he failed his quest, the children wouldn't survive.

They only had until his birthday to reach the sun, but even orphans were his citizens. It didn't sit well to leave them so defenceless.

And, by Shang Qinghua's estimate they should have plenty of time.

"We'll build them a hearth." The decision abated the guilt, once it was made he was finally able to sleep.

The project took three days to dig the hearth and quarry stone to build it proper. Learning of their visitor's goal, the children were eager to help. Still Mobei-Jun's muscles ached by the end of it, but it was worth it to see the excitement and awe on the children's faces as Shang Qinghua taught them to light the fire.

They left comfortable in the knowledge that the orphans wouldn't freeze in their absence, even leaving a portion of their rations so Luo Binghe wouldn't have to forage in the dark. Hopefully it would last until light returned to the world.

It wasn't long after they left when the sky changed and small white flakes began to fall.

Another reason to restore the sun.

Mobei-Jun started the next leg of their journey with a sense of accomplishment. Shang Qinghua seemed a bit more thoughtful but it wasn't long before he was back to chatting the day away, somehow his rambling made the darkness feel like it was barely there.

The cold grew bitter, and several days after leaving the cabin, Mobei-Jun was already

missing the hearth.

The wind had blown in from a clearing ahead of them, making the lantern flicker, its meagre light didn't reach far enough for them to see much until they were well within the clearing.

Neatly ordered rows of plants were already wilting under the snow, and just past them sat a farmhouse. Getting closer revealed flickering torches and two figures harvesting the failing crop.

The farmer and his sister introduced themselves as Liu Qingge and Liu Mingyan. Shang Qinghua once again did all the talking and asked if they could stay the night, if only to escape the wind and cold.

Liu Mingyan agreed to their request, but not without making one of her own.

"There's no way we'll manage on our own, without the sun we'll lose most of the crop, especially if the snow keeps up."

Liu Qingge disagreed.

"What's the point? None of it will keep. We can't possibly eat all of it before it goes bad."

Shang Qinghua looked stricken.

"Is it really so dire? Is there no way to preserve any of it?"

Liu Mingyan shook her head.

"Not quickly, usually we'd set it out under the sun but..." She gestured to the dark cloudy sky.

Mobei-Jun frowned, trying to think about how they maintained the food in the palace.

"What about a cold cellar?" Shang Qinghua gave him a confused look, "It won't help the plants in the ground but the harvest can be kept cool and dry so it won't spoil as quickly."

"So how do we get one of these cold cellars?" Liu Qingge looked at him skeptically.

"Do you have a shovel?"

Their journey was delayed another week on the farmstead, first helping Liu Qingge dig a cellar and then to help Liu Mingyan harvest the remaining crops. They didn't manage to save all the plants but they managed to store a sizable amount.

Despite the insistence from the Liu siblings they didn't dare stay another day, setting off the morning after their task was complete. Mobei-Jun's impatience seemed to be rubbing off on Shang Qinghua, the man dragged him down the path before they even finished their farewells.

##PAGE BREAK##

By the time they were back on the road, Mobei-Jun realized there had already been several weeks since their departure. The surety that they could find the sun and still return in time for the coronation was beginning to wane.

Perhaps if they hadn't stopped to help the orphans or the farmers they might have already reached the mountain cave, but he found it difficult to blame those who were victims of the missing sun.

That didn't stop the building anxiety, he was away from the palace, the seat of power, surely his uncle was wreaking havoc.

"We're nearly there! I can see the mountains in the distance." Mobei-Jun couldn't, but he believed Shang Qinghua, "My King—"

"Prince." The correction was habit by now, even if his uncle's spies were not around to condemn him for the slipup.

"My Prince," Shang Qinghua smiled cheekily, and it warmed him in a way he didn't fully understand, "Once we get there, you will return the sun and take your throne."

The comforting heat vanished with Shang Qinghua's words, Mobei-Jun frowned.

Shang Qinghua had said 'you' not 'us.' It took a moment for him to comprehend the difference and why it had affected Mobei-Jun so deeply. He had been thinking in terms of 'us' for a while.

So long in fact, that all his thoughts of his triumphant return heavily featured Shang Qinghua. He could no longer imagine his coronation without the man by his side.

But he'd not discussed it with Shang Qinghua, how was the other man to know if he kept quiet? Before he could find the words, Shang Qinghua noticed something in the distance.

"Look! A Light!" Mobei-Jun squinted, barely making out the smallest flicker in the distance, "I think it's a hut, perhaps they'll let us stay for the night."

Shang Qinghua didn't wait for a reply before bounding off into the snow, somehow taking all the warmth and light with him, despite the lamp still firmly gripped in Mobei-Jun's hand.

He was forced to follow the path Shang Qinghua had carved in the rising snow in order to catch up. Just as Shang Qinghua guessed, it was a hut, with a single inhabitant already speaking with Shang Qinghua.

"You travelled all this way? Don't you know how dangerous it is in the dark?" The man was scolding him, it annoyed Mobei-Jun who approached them, placing himself firmly behind Shang Qinghua in support. "Is there a problem?" Seeing him, the man shrunk back, clearly intimidated.

"Not at all, just..." He took a moment to weigh his words, "You'll have ill luck navigating by lamplight. Perhaps you should stay til the sun returns."

The man seemed contrite enough for them to accept the offer.

"One night." They could hardly afford more.

Their host was a scholar by the name of Shen Qingqiu, living alone with his studies. The hut was too small for a proper hearth so they built a fire pit out front.

Shen Qingqiu had many questions, and it was clear he rarely had visitors. Shang Qinghua happily answered them, even telling stories of their journey.

Mobei-Jun was content to listen, he still couldn't pinpoint exactly when Shang Qinghua's voice had gone from grating to soothing, but he enjoyed hearing it.

Shang Qinghua had a talent for telling stories.

The night wore on and the fire died down, eventually Shang Qinghua's tongue ran dry, it was then Mobei-Jun asked a question of his own.

"You're a scholar, do you know why the sun disappeared?"

"I cannot say for sure; I'm no astronomer, what I do know is that people will suffer until it returns. People like those children, and the farmers, we rely on the sun for so many things, without it we may not survive."

The man's eloquence didn't soften the truth of the matter, confirming Mobei-Jun's own

fears.

Shang Qinghua looked grief-stricken, fists clenching with worry. Mobei-Jun reached out, placing his one hand over Shang Qinghua's. They were warm, Shang Qinghua was always warm.

He was so intent on the hand held in his own that the brightening sky took him by surprise.

"What is that?" Shang Qinghua gasped. Mobei-Jun followed his gaze up, secretly he hoped to see the rising sun, but instead lights flickered brighter than the stars dancing across the sky above them.

"Just the Aurora, a common phenomenon in the north, it's pretty but not nearly as useful as sunlight." Shen Qingqiu barely looked up, he excused himself to sleep, leaving Mobei-Jun and Shang Qinghua to watch the dancing lights.

Mobei-Jun had witnessed the Aurora before, but Shang Qinghua clearly had not. The enraptured look in his eyes was something special. Wonder and amazement illuminated by the pulsing colour and light reflecting off the planes of his face.

He was beautiful.

"Shang Qinghua?"



"Mm?"

"Return to the place with me." The statement startled him, his eyes widening and dropping to meet Mobei-Jun's.

"But we're almost there, we can't give up!"

"When we're done. Sun or no, I want you to stay by my side." Mobei-Jun's nerves danced with fire, in step with the Aurora above. Shang Qinghua's fingers burned under his own.

Shang Qinghua's jaw dropped as his face cycled through a range of emotions—confusion, excitement, awe—but eventually his expression fell and his eyebrows scrunched together.

Mobei-Jun resisted the urge to smooth them out.

"I'm...flattered, my ki—prince, but I'm not sure it's a good idea." Mobei-Jun's gaze hardened, "Ask me again, after we've found the sun."

Glistening eyes met his own, brimming with remorse.

"Please?"

The flickering lights haloed him, casting a delicate ethereal aura around the man. How could the prince refuse such a creature?

So despite the confusion and frustration constricting around his heart, Mobei-Jun nodded in agreement.

Mobei-Jun couldn't sleep that night, his mind kept turning over Shang Qinghua's

answer.

Why wait? There was no reason to stall, even if he didn't want anything to do with Mobei-Jun, he could have just said no. Did he think finding the sun would make the prince change his mind?

Did he have such a low opinion of Mobei-Jun?

The thought was laughable, a king was meant to want for nothing but the prosperity of his kingdom, and this was the first time Mobei-Jun ever felt the desire for anything more.

It was possible his guide had lied to him, possible that there was no sun hidden in the mountains. It was not a foreign thought, but if so, why continue the ruse?

The dusk was difficult to distinguish from the dawn with morning light, so at some point Mobei-Jun simply decided that attempting to sleep was pointless. He'd end his ruminations, they would reach the sun's cave and there he would have his answer.

The Aurora had diminished, the colour faded, leaving a sparse pale light to flicker above. Bright blues and fluorescent greens had dulled to hollow white.

Shen Qingqiu saw them off, disappointed to see his company leave but wishing them luck on their journey all the same. He insisted Shang Qinghua owed him a better tale than the ones told the night before.

Mobei-Jun had no intent to linger, they were nearing the end of their quest and he was eager to see it through, especially now with an added stake.

The final leg of their expedition began with silence. Mobei-Jun, once accustomed to it, felt the quiet like a burden as he followed behind Shang Qinghua.

Shang Qinghua walked like a man on his way to the gallows, his pace slowed deliberately even as they grew closer to the mountain. Again, Mobei-Jun had to wonder if he'd been lied to, or worse. What if his uncle had hired Shang Qinghua to deceive him?

But none of Linguang-Jun's men would be so eager to dirty themselves hauling stone for orphans, or harvesting crops for farmers. No one his uncle deemed worthy could have possibly wove intricate tales or been so enamoured by the Aurora.

If he'd been hired to stall Mobei-Jun he was failing. By the prince's measure, there was still enough time to return for the coronation, even if they failed.

Reaching the base of the mountain, Mobei-Jun worried about climbing its face in the pitch black. He'd tried to ration the lamp oil, but with all the extra time they had taken, he only had enough left for half a day at most.

Shang Qinghua however, ignored the rock face, instead he showed Mobei-Jun a small hidden trail. It was steep, but they would have an easier time reaching their destination.

It was too narrow to travel abreast so Shang Qinghua insisted Mobei-Jun go first.

"The cave is at the end of the trail, you can't miss it. Besides, you have our light." Not that it had seemed to matter before. Mobei-Jun felt a creeping fear, was Shang Qinghua going to run away? He grasped the man's arm a bit too tightly.

"I promise, I will be right behind you, my King."

"Prince." Despite his uneasy feeling, Mobei-Jun still uttered the correction—and Shang Qinghua's smile widened, more genuine than before.

Mobei-Jun squeezed Shang Qinghua's hand before turning to the path.

It twisted and curved, winding its way up the mountain. Some crevices were so narrow he had to hold his breath to squeeze past, unable to see farther than the shrinking circle of his small lamp.

He didn't dare look behind.

Still Shang Qinghua kept a steady hand on his back, reassuring and solid, a reminder that he was still there. His warmth bolstered the prince, allowing him to continue forward and focus on his quest.

He would bring the sun back to his kingdom, for warmth, for food, for light—

For Shang Qinghua to stay.

The head of the path opened up, the ground levelled out to a small platform. By his measure they were halfway up the mountain. The sparse outcropping made it easy to find the cave entrance, even if it was nearly camouflaged in the mountain's shadow.

It was barely large enough for Mobei-Jun to pass through, he had to duck, but once past the entrance it opened up just enough for him to stand tall.

The cavern stretched forward an indeterminable distance, the flickering lamplight was unable to reach into the deepest corners. It even failed to illuminate the walls, leaving Mobei-Jun to stand alone in a failing circle of light.

With no sign of the sun.

He hadn't gone far, but even turning around it was difficult to pick out where the cavern entrance had been. Shang Qinghua's hand had left his back and the man was no longer within his failing vision.

Fear nearly choked him.

"Shang Qinghua!"

As he called out, the light extinguished, leaving him alone in the unsettling void.

"I am here." The response was calm, still Mobei-Jun turned towards the voice, desperate to make out his companion in the cave's entrance.

It shouldn't have worked, there was no light to see anything.

Except there was. Shang Qinghua stepped into the cave and every inch of him was illuminated, almost as if he was the source. Mobei-Jun could only stare in awe as every step further filled the cave with bright daylight.

The unknown space lit up, displaying its vastness. Rock circled them, creating a spherical cavern as if it had conformed to some great shape. Mobei-Jun had never felt so small.

He looked back to Shang Qinghua, only to flinch away from the blinding light, looking at the man felt like he was looking directly into—

Directly into the sun.

"It's you." He couldn't keep the reverence from his tone, "It's been you this whole time?" He could only squint through tears, still determined to witness the man before him.

Shang Qinghua was the same, yet wholly different. His drab brown robes sparkled

like the purest gold and his bright eyes shone brighter. It reminded Mobei-Jun about how beautiful he'd been sitting beneath the aurora.

And he looked just as sad.

"Why?"

Shang Qinghua let out a deep sigh and it hit the prince like a summer wind.

"Crossing the sky day in, day out felt tedious, so I started watching humans." He picked at invisible threads on his sleeve.

"You live such interesting lives, I wondered what it would be like to be human. Then a certain prince caught my eye," He looked up through his lashes, swirling amber burning a hole through Mobei-Jun's heart, "You always were my favourite."

"When I heard about your coronation I saw my chance, I thought the world could manage without me for a time." His nervous smile fell, "I guess I thought wrong."

"You came for me?" The bright light faded to a dull glow and in an instant Shang Qinghua had knelt at his feet, a mirror of their first meeting.

"I have caused you trouble, the least I can do is help you resolve it. You've worked so hard, my Prince." Mobei-Jun's heart slammed against his ribs, "It was selfish of me, but I could not give up the chance to spend time with you. I never meant to cause such strife."

"It was never an ill omen, but I will make it right." He raised his head, blinding Mobei-Jun once more, "I will rise the morning of your coronation, nobody will be able to question your right to be king."

Mobei-Jun couldn't breathe, he could only move to grab Shang Qinghua's hand,

holding it between his own.

"Come with me." Shang Qinghua's brows drew close in confusion.

"My Prince?"

"You said to ask again, so now I am asking. He lowered himself to one knee, gripping Shang Qinghua's hand like a lifeline, "Stay with me?"

"My prince? The people—"

"Just the winter." Sadness filled the sun's eyes.

"That is a selfish request."

"Then let me be selfish, just this once. The people have their preserves, their hearths and their stories. Let me have you. They can bask in your light all summer, let me hold you through the winter."

He stared hopefully into Shang Qinghua's eyes, the sun sputtered, unable to give him an answer.

Instantly the cave went dark, the hand within Mobei-Jun's was replaced with something warm and smooth.

He blinked away the darkness to see a small glowing stone within his grasp, and no sign of the sun.

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Mobei-Jun made his way down the mountain path in a daze, his eyes kept drifting to the sunstone in his hand, trying desperately to decipher its meaning.

Shang Qinghua was the sun, Mobei-Jun should have felt deceived or betrayed,

but Shang Qinghua had failed to rise because he'd wanted to attend Mobei-Jun's coronation. That and he'd never lied; not to Mobei-Jun, he'd only promised they'd meet the sun in the cave.

Which was exactly what had happened.

Mobei-Jun was so lost in his ruminations that he barely recognized Shen Qingqiu's empty hut as he passed it by.

The scholar had offered it as a place to stay on the return, but the man was nowhere to be found and the firepit had filled with snow.

With a bit of resentment, Mobei-Jun wondered if the missing man had also been a heavenly body hiding on earth. The idea made no sense and he abandoned it, it did nothing to make him feel better.

He slept the night alone in the cabin, hugging the sunstone for warmth.

Overnight the snow had begun to fall in earnest, every step took a monumental effort, every breath felt laboured. Still he continued on.

His sense of time did not improve, there was no way to tell how long he'd been travelling by the time he reached the Liu farm.

Like Shen Qingqiu's hut it was empty, fresh snow giving it an untouched aura.

Once again he slept alone, a bitter chill burning through his veins, one even Shang Qinghua's sunstone couldn't keep at bay.

When he awoke he began again.

Days passed that way, barely sleeping, only moving forward. His muscles ached and the cold burned, the sun stone could not stop the light from dimming with every step. He began to wonder if he was truly alone in the world. In the darkness the unending, untouched powder made the world feel abandoned.

He could only convince himself to take one step at a time, the world needed the sun, and Shang Qinghua had promised to rise on his coronation.

It became too much and eventually Mobei-Jun collapsed, seeing only darkness half buried in snow.

The sound of voices woke him, alongside an invigorating warmth spreading through his limbs.

It was bright, even without opening his eyes he could see it. The air was warm, carrying the scent of fresh bread and roasted vegetables, cut with the soft laughter of children.

Slowly he opened his eyes, blinking away the darkness that had surrounded him wholly since he'd left the mountain.

"Am I dead?" His first thought escaped through cracked lips.

The room was familiar, as were the faces of the people filling it. He was in the orphan's cabin with its new hearth blazing merrily, but Luo Binghe and Sha Hualing weren't alone.

Liu Qingge and Liu Mingyan had somehow joined the children, it was likely their stock boiling over the fire.

A hand patted him companionably on his shoulder and he turned to see Shen Qingqiu smile down at him.

"Not yet friend, but if farmer Liu hadn't gone for firewood it might have been a different story."

"My thanks." Mobei-Jun nodded at his saviour, and Liu Qingge returned the gesture before handing him a bowl of hearty stew.

He accepted it graciously, realizing only then that he hadn't eaten since the night before the cave. Thankfully his company gave him the chance to polish off the meal before bombarding him with questions.

But that could not hold them off forever.

"Did you reach the cave?"

"Where is your friend?"

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

He managed to choke out simple answers, clipped and short enough that eventually they'd stop asking. He felt the absence of Shang Qinghua's easy words more keenly, but addressing it properly felt too heavy a task.

They did not push him, happy to welcome his company and Mobei-Jun cherished it. Alone the weight of his mission was unbearable, companionship thawed his veins, even if it didn't reach his heart.

He left them in higher spirits, making it back to the capital with a day to spare. His return was heralded loudly, but walking through the gates had revealed a sombre and quiet crowd.

The prince had returned, but the sun still hadn't risen. Had he failed?

While there were twice as many people crowding the darkened streets they kept their distance, but in their eyes was

desperation, hoping for good news.

Rather than give it, Mobei-Jun marched back to the palace in silence. He was met there by attendants and only then did he issue his orders.

"Prepare for my coronation, tomorrow the Northern King will greet the sun."

Those words caused a ripple through the crowd, rolling with desperate fervour passing from person to person. Eventually reaching every ear, including Linguang-Jun's.

But his uncle's approval didn't matter anymore. Mobei-Jun was determined to see the sun rise if only to see Shang Qinghua one more time.

That night he didn't sleep, he didn't even try, instead he stared out at the sky from the window he had once used to greet the sun every day.

It seemed the city shared his sleeplessness. The crowd amassed on the palace grounds early, their impatience almost as fierce as his own.

Eventually he entered the courtyard, savouring the way the air bit into his lungs. He would be wholly ice if not for the warm stone in his hand.

A stage had been constructed above the crowd. His crown sat on a pedestal at its peak, waiting to rest upon his brow. By tradition his uncle was supposed to place it there, but Linguang-Jun stood at the platform's base instead

"What do you think you're doing? You failed." He sneered, his anger palpable. Before Mobei-Jun would argue, or try to defend himself, now all he could do was trust in Shang Qinghua's promise of light.

Despite his protest, Linguang-Jun didn't stop him as he took the first step towards the platform. Each step after he moved deliberate and even, holding the sunstone to his chest so it rose with him.

He thought of the journey, the orphans, the farmers, the scholar, the treacherous climb in the dark, but mostly, he thought of Shang Qinghua.

With every step the sky seemed to lighten, but it wasn't until he was halfway up the scaffold that an orange pink light flooded the sky. Awed whispers floated up from the crowd below.

Mobei-Jun let a secret smile grace his lips.

Shang Qinghua hadn't lied.

He felt lighter with every step, his pace remained steady until the last step where he faltered.

Shang Qinghua stood upon the stage holding his crown, bright and beautiful.

Shang Qinghua winked at him before addressing the crowd.

"I am the sun, my absence was but a test for Mobei-Jun." He turned to smile at the prince, "He has exceeded my every expectation."

He smiled, holding out the crown to Mobei-Jun, and the prince felt his knees wanting to buckle. He steeled himself, rising past the last step first before dropping to a knee before the sun.

Shang Qinghua took a step towards him, holding the crown aloft, before reverently placing it on Mobei-Jun's head.

"I have one final task for you, my King." He kept his voice low, only Mobei-Jun could hear him over the din of the crowd.

"Anything."

"Teach them. Teach them to build hearths, to preserve food, teach them stories to tell. Prepare them for winter."

"Why?" Shang Qinghua eyed him coyly before his voice once again rose to reach the ears of the crowd.

"As reward for his efforts, only he shall be rewarded with my company, I will leave the sky for the winter and only return for the spring thaw. But I promise that I will always return."

Shang Qinghua's form brightened as Mobei-Jun's moved, he grasped the man's chin in his palm. Looking directly at him didn't hurt his eyes like it had before, or perhaps Mobei-Jun didn't care.

He pulled Shang Qinghua close and met his lips.

Shang Qinghua giggled, at the sound Mobei-Jun couldn't help but smile.

"Long live my King."





MERCHANDISE

Artists:

LILLACHAN SEIRAHERON







EXPLICIT/R18 SECTION

The following section contains explicit content that is intended for 18+ audiences, please proceed at your own discretion.

TCHAIKOVSKY NEVER HAD THIS PROBLEM

Rating: Explicit

RelationshipsMoshang, implied Bingqiu

Characters

Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun, Shen Yuan, Shen Jiu, Yue Qingyuan, Qi Qingqi, Liu Qingge, Linguang-Jun

Tags

Humor, Violence, Anal Sex, Furry

Summary

Shang Qinghua learns the true meaning of Christmas when he...experiences mortal terror and makes out with a nutcracker?

Author:

OVERGROWNRUINS

Illustrated by:

Erz.Blackwood

Once upon a time...

No. That's stupid. Well, no, actually it's a classic. Keep it.

Once upon a time, there was a much beloved prince.

Too unrealistic. Boring! Change it.

Once upon a time, there was a lonely prince. His parents had long since passed, leaving the throne to him. Though he was the heir to the Northern kingdom and surrounded by servants at his disposal, he trusted no one—and so his wicked uncle, eager to usurp his nephew, confronted the lonely prince whilst he was unaware and used his foul magics to—

"A-Hua, you better not be writing that lewd nonsense again! I'll tell Uncle Qingyuan, you see if I don't!"

Shang Qinghua startled as a hand slapped down on his paper. The ink hadn't even dried yet! His assailant was glaring at him accusingly, though the little shake he had to do to get the sticky page off of his hand ruined the intimidation effect beautifully.

"Uncle will be here in a few minutes," Shen Yuan said. "A-Jiu sent me to fetch you. He couldn't find you anywhere, though of course *I* knew you'd be in here writing... garbage."

His nose crinkled, as though even thinking about it offended the senses. Ah, Shang Qinghua mused wryly, what a charming little brother. Carefully, he shook out the page Shen Yuan had smudged and tucked it into one of his desk drawers—it was different from his usual work, but in spite of that, or perhaps because of it, he felt a bit protective of the piece. He wasn't used to working with such a fantastical writing style, and didn't want to subject it to Shen Yuan's critical literary eye quite yet.

Or ever.

"It won't kill you to say the word erotica, A-Yuan," he said, hanging up his cleaned brush, "and anyways, I'm not even writing erotica this time."

"Like I would believe that," Shen Yuan scoffed, mimicking his more acerbic twin. Delightful.

"You don't have to believe it for it to be true, oh wise one."

Shen Yuan had no catty rebuttal to that, and turned on his heel.

Shang Qinghua followed him downstairs regardless of the rude interruption, because a visit from Uncle Qingyuan was nothing to sneeze at (no matter the fact that he was, technically, their legal guardian, and probably should have been around more often). The array of Shang Qinghua's younger siblings were scattered throughout the receiving room: Liu Qingge diligently at the door, Shen Yuan moving to sit by Shen Jiu, Qi Qingqi warming her feet by the fire after spending all day romping about outside. Shang Qinghua took his customary seat on the lounge chair just as Uncle Qingyuan stepped into the room, bags dangling from the curve of his arm.

He looked well put-together, as usual, dressed all in black apart from his steel gray necktie. Snow was melting off his shoulders a bit, but otherwise he made for a picture-perfect portrait of a dashing older man.

Shen Jiu, thoroughly unimpressed by most things in life, was unimpressed by this most of all.

"So, you show your face here again, Uncle," he sneered, nose primly turned up. A picture perfect young mistress. "Finally decided we were worth returning to?"

Uncle Qingyuan winced and smiled. "I thought I might surprise you."

"A surprise? Are you finally going to reveal to us that we're adopted?" Shang Qinghua piped up. Shen Yuan valiantly hid his laughter behind a minuscule facial twitch.

"But we are adopted," Liu Qingge replied, nose crunched in confusion. Bless his heart, he wouldn't get a joke if it punched him in the face—though he'd certainly win the ensuing fight. And okay, maybe it wasn't the funniest joke in the book, but it *did* make Uncle's smile strain at the corners, which meant Shang Qinghua would be in Shen Jiu's good graces for at least two hours. He would take what he could get.

Apart from the slight tightness of his expression, however, Uncle Qingyuan seemed uninterested in gracing the joke with a response. The bags on his arm were slid onto his hands and handed out.

"Surprise presents," Uncle Qingyuan said once everything had been distributed. "I thought maybe we'd observe the gift-giving custom of the local holiday. Go on ahead, open them."

Carefully, Shang Qinghua reached into the bag, fingers brushing crinkled wrapping paper, and felt the grain of wood on his fingertips. Maybe new brushes? He gripped the object and was met with—a face. It was a nutcracker. Pulling the rest of the wooden doll out, Shang Qinghua quietly lamented his uncle's poor taste. Although this nutcracker was a curious trinket—quite different from the ones Shang Qinghua had seen in storefront windows, donning blue instead of red, with little carved pointy ears and a tiny blue mark between its heavy, painted brows—he'd certainly never asked for one before.

He glanced at his siblings. Liu Qingge and

Shen Jiu looked quietly pleased with their respective wooden swords and booklet of music sheets, and Shen Yuan was already trying on his new pointe shoes. Even Qi Qingqi, chronically hard to satisfy, was running her hands over the embroidery on the dress she had received with appreciation.

Ah, really Uncle Qingyuan, you couldn't even pretend I'm not your least favorite? You might as well have bought me a candle.

Still, it seemed with the bringing of gifts, Uncle Qingyuan was forgiven for his absence. Winter always sent the sun hiding away early, sinking below the rooftops of London before bedtime, and the lack of natural light usually sent everyone off to sleep once it grew dark. Shang Qinghua made sure all of his younger siblings were ready for bed (besides Shen Yuan, who whispered that he was going to his friend Luo Binghe's house for the night and snuck out his second floor window) before snuffing the candles and hiding away in his own room.

He'd set the nutcracker on the dresser farthest from the hearth; though uninspired, it was an expensive gift, delicately painted and accented with real metal epaulets and chains. He was loath to lose it to the fire if he awoke and accidentally knocked it over. In the soft light of the dying embers, Shang Qinghua could admit, it really seemed rather handsome. It had a proud, noble bearing.

What a silly thing to think of a wooden toy. He disrobed and shook his hair loose. The bed called to him, and he was not one to deny its allure, climbing in and tucking the duvet up under his chin. He turned onto his side, and the last thing he saw before his eyes closed was the rigid stature of the nutcracker, looming on his bedside dresser.

Truly a handsome little thing.

The chiming of the grandfather clock in Shang Qinghua's room—the one with the creepily bright-eyed owl statuette on top—awoke him at midnight. This in and of itself was an oddity, since he'd specifically tampered with its inner mechanics so it wouldn't toll late at night; he slept lightly and hated waking at every hour on the hour to its stupid ringing.

The faint squeaking and rattling he heard on his floor was a touch concerning, too.

Shang Qinghua rolled over in bed and peered over the edge, only to blanch when greeted with a swarming mass of *rats* upon his floor. And this was no chaotic search for the snacks Shang Qinghua kept stashed in his desk drawers, no—they were circling a small figure on the rug, and— good heavens, the nutcracker?! It was moving, having drawn the little wooden sword at its hip, swinging it around to keep the rats back. Though the rats outnumbered the



nutcracker many times over, it appeared to be holding its own quite well, sending rats tumbling backwards over themselves to get away from its lunging swipes.

Shang Qinghua did the most logical thing and shrieked bloody murder. He then did the second most logical thing and grabbed the fire poker he kept at his bedside (in case of a home invasion, of course) and started swinging it wildly at the rats.

The rats skittered out of his range, hissing and clicking their teeth. They regrouped at the feet of a much larger rat, by an opening in Shang Qinghua's wall that he could swear wasn't there when he went to sleep. The larger rat, ostensibly the leader, held a little silver staff in its tiny clawed grip. It would've been cute, if the creature didn't point the staff at him with great menace and squeak, "You dare aid the prince?! You will share his fate then!"

Before Shang Qinghua could even think of screaming about a *talking rat*, the staff sparked bright blue, and a bolt arched off of it towards Shang Qinghua. The moment before the electricity struck, the clock chimed once again and a figure flung itself before him. Though it intercepted the brunt of the attack, some of the luminous power still skated past and made contact with Shang Qinghua, tingling where it washed over his body. He stumbled off the bed and nearly tripped over the nutcracker, eyes closed tight.

When he opened them, he nearly fainted dead away. He almost didn't recognize where he was, as one's room looks quite different when viewed from three inches off the ground.

He shakily glanced at his hands—peeping out from the hems of his shrunken nightgown sleeves, they were tiny and soft, covered with a thin white peach fuzz on top

and narrowed down to little pink claw tips. When he crouched, his knee joints bent in a direction he wasn't used to, and he felt even softer around his midsection than usual. A quick pat on his face confirmed the existence of a shallowly curved snout and wet, flat nose. Shang Qinghua squeaked. Literally.

He was a rodent.

Trying and failing miserably not to panic, Shang Qinghua latched onto the nearest available firm surface—which just so happened to be the leg of the nutcracker. The nutcracker, in turn, seemed summarily unenthused. Luckily, it did not try to shake Shang Qinghua off. He really didn't think he could handle rejection gracefully, even from a stranger, in his current mental state.

In front of them, a lump of wood was righting itself. As it shook out its carved wings, still faintly sparkling with the attack it had intercepted, Shang Qinghua numbly recognized it as the owl ornament that usually perched atop his grandfather clock. Sure, why not. Let all of his furniture and decorations come to life and stage grand battles while he slept, what did he care? (A lot, actually, he cared a lot.) The rats drew back, apparently wary of the foreign interference. The nutcracker also shifted back into something resembling a fighting stance, staring down the owl. The wooden bird did not attack, however. It settled its wings and then opened its beak with an unsettling *clack*.

"Congratulations are in order!" came an eerily mechanical voice, spilling from its unmoving maw.

No one responded. Undeterred by its tense audience, the owl continued, addressing Shang Qinghua pointedly:

"The Author has achieved the highest form

of enlightenment—the ability to navigate one of his own stories! Story selected: *The Ice Prince*. Please enjoy your experience in a world of your own making!"

His...world? Shang Qinghua blinked. His story? He turned to the nutcracker; sure enough, the light bluish skin tone painted on and the luxuriously carved dark hair matched the image he had of the lonely prince in his mind, but-the rest of it was nonsense! If the nutcracker was the prince, then Shang Qinghua had certainly not written that! It would surely mean that that rat leader was the traitorous uncle, wielding such fierce magical powers, but he never wrote the man as a literal rat! Lastly, never once had he given the prince a companion, much less a furry one! The prince had been written as a little fantasy for himself, thank you very much!

Indignance overrode his previous shock and he shook his tiny fist at the owl, spewing his complaints. How dare it take such creative license with his work?! He would never write something so silly as toys and rats coming alive to fight one another in the night!

Okay, maybe he might. Some of the stranger erotica he was commissioned for certainly came close. But still!

"At least tell me how to turn back!" he shrieked, nearly dislodging himself from the nutcracker's leg.

"It is your story, so you must follow your rules," the owl said.

"Thank you, that is literally so unhelpful."

"You are welcome, Author."

Shang Qinghua would have shrieked in rage, but just then the nutcracker spoke up.

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"Surely," it—he said, voice rich and low and rough like wood grain, "as the guide to his story, you can offer a better clue than that."

It wasn't quite a threat, but the owl seemed ruffled anyways, shifting from foot to foot. It relented and replied, "Assuming story role: The Call to Adventure. Seek out the Sugar Plum Fairy, who will aid you in the return of your bodies."

Bodies *plural*—so the prince wasn't just always going to be a nutcracker, at least there was that. Not that the rest of the clue was very useful, as Shang Qinghua had no idea who this sugared fruit princess was or where to find it. There was no more time for questions, though, since the owl deemed its cryptic message received and took off, fluttering back up to the top of the grandfather clock. Useless pile of gears, ugh.

Seeing the rats reassembling now that the owl had left, Shang Qinghua returned to thigh-hugging with zeal.

"Sooooo Mr. Nutcracker," he said (because he never actually named the prince), "we ought to stick together, right? Since we both, ah, need to change back?"

The nutcracker grunted, which Shang Qinghua chose to take as confirmation.

"Good, good. It would be cruel to leave me behind, you know? After all, I really got the short end of the stick here, being a little mouse and all. At least you have a nicely articulated form! I have no idea how to run in this body, which is really the only thing I'm good at physically, to be honest, and—AHHHH!"

"Hamster," the nutcracker intoned as he dodged an oncoming rat, dragging Shang Qinghua along with him. He brought the wooden sword down on its head. It wasn't

sharp enough in any way to cut, but blunt force trauma served just as well.

"Hamster? What do you mean hamster?!" Shang Qinghua yelled, scrabbling to get off the leg and behind the nutcracker, out of the direct line of battle.

"You are a hamster, not a mouse. No tail."

Under closer inspection, indeed, it did appear that Shang Qinghua was a hamster, but what exact species of rodent he was did not clock very high on his priority list. He was a touch more concerned with, oh, surviving the current rat onslaught.

The nutcracker was holding his own fairly well, but Shang Qinghua was not confident in his ability to continue to do so while protecting a dead-weight hanger-on hamster. So he turned to the bedding, which was partially pooled on the floor from where he'd thrown the duvet back in a panic, forming a nice little ladder from the floor to the top of the bed. Though his climbing skills weren't exactly worth writing home about, he still clambered up the duvet best he was able. His little claws were actually quite useful. Less helpful was the leader rat commanding his vermin army



to tear Shang Qinghua and the prince to shreds. When he made it to the top and peered back down, Shang Qinghua was pleased to find that the rats were too heavy and too numerous to climb up with him, dragging the duvet off the mattress and squeaking as they buried themselves.

The nutcracker was holding his own pretty well still, but Shang Qinghua was concerned about the number of rats surrounding him. They were getting braver, too, daring to dart in and try to bite at the nutcracker's ankles. The nutcracker's already fiercely painted expression furrowed into a truly menacing scowl, and he clacked the mechanism of his wooden jaw at the rats threateningly.

If he was overrun, it wouldn't be long before the rats switched focus to him, Shang Qinghua reasoned to himself. It had absolutely nothing to do with how much of a damn shame it would be to lose that handsomely carved face, no sir.

And so Shang Qinghua scrambled across his bedding and leapt to his end table, upon which he always kept a lit candle at night, for his childish fear of the dark. The candlestick was made of heavy, wrought iron that never seemed so weighty when Shang Qinghua was big. But he wasn't big anymore, was he? So he dug his little clawed feet into the table and shoved, pushing the candlestick close to the edge. He hesitated when he reached the lip. Peeking over the edge, he saw the rat leader, the prince's uncle, in the direct line of fire (ha). To be honest, Shang Qinghua had never personally killed even a non-sentient rat before; was he really prepared to take the life of a speaking, thinking one?

"Rip him apart!" the rat-uncle shouted, waving his now-inert staff about wildly. "I'll use his splintered limbs for toothpicks, the brat! And get his cowardly little shadow,

too, I'll turn his pelt into a cape!"

Yeah, no, fuck this guy.

Shang Qinghua heaved the candlestick one last time, sending it toppling end-over-end to the floor below. He didn't see the impact, only heard the bellowing *thud* and a pained shriek before he was able to rush over and look over the edge.

Every rat in the room froze and turned back to their leader, who lay on the floor. Not a direct hit, Shang Qinghua cursed, the bastard was standing up again. But his leg was twisted, and the lit candle had caught on his fur, scorching half of his body. He was still faintly smoldering as he lurched up. He staggered a few steps back towards the hole in the wall, and then stopped.

"Retreat! Come to the aid of your true king, you miserable rats, come! We'll finish them off another time!" he cried.

The rats streamed back towards the hole in the wall with haste. The nutcracker swiped at the stragglers, but even he was no match for the speed at which they scurried. When he made to chase after them into the depths, Shang Qinghua cried out, "Wait!"

The nutcracker waited. Shang QInghua scrambled back onto the bed, and then began the arduous process of lowering himself back to the ground. Paw under claw, he slowly inched down the side of the mattress, until he reached the wooden bedframe and could climb no further. Against his better judgment, he let himself fall the remaining foot of distance between the frame and the floor-a middling distance for a human, but a great depth for a hamster. Luckily, it seemed being small had its advantages. Terminal velocity was not so easily achieved, and so Shang Qinghua merely hit the ground with a squeak and rolled a few centimeters.

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He stood up and brushed himself off quickly, conscious of the nutcracker's gaze upon him. He scurried over, skirting the fallen candlestick and signed bits of fur on the floor. As he drew even with the nutcracker, he dimly noted that he barely reached the—man?—man's wooden waist.

"What," the nutcracker barked, impatient. "They're getting away."

"Ah, is that not...ideal?" Shang Qinghua said.

"No."

"Even though they vastly outnumber us?"

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The nutcracker clacked his jaw irritably. But he slung his sword back through the leather loop at his waist, and he did not turn to pursue the rats into the hole, so Shang Qinghua counted it as a win.

"What do you suggest then?"

Shang Qinghua blinked. Then: "Rat poison, of course."

Through the stiffness of his painted expression, the nutcracker looked mildly impressed. Shang Qinghua was almost offended—he may be a coward, but rats were no joke! You either killed them or said goodbye to everything in your kitchen and pantry!

"We just need to become human again," Shang Qinghua said. "Or at least I do. I didn't get far enough in the story to decide if the Northern Prince was a human or some kind of ice creature. But you get the idea. Humanoid. Bigger."

There was no objection from the nutcracker, so Shang Qinghua cautiously wrapped a paw around one of his stiff wooden hands to tug him away from the hole. No use tempting any straggler rats into a sneak attack. The nutcracker, thankfully, put up no resistance. Inwardly, Shang Qinghua despaired; where was his stoic and untrusting prince character?! Well, the stoic part was there—but why was he following a strange hamster so patiently? Where was that quiet, half-feral urge to lash out at anyone who got close, ah? That damn owl probably screwed up his personality, just like it made him into a wooden toy.

He settled them on the fallen duvet on the floor. He didn't know if nutcrackers felt cushioning, but he *personally* needed a break after all that hustling and bustling. Quite frankly, his deflated old comforter felt even better when he was this small; as he was too light to make a significant dent in it, and thus it supported his joints quite nicely.

Though he let his eyes rest and dearly wanted to curl up and take a nap, he didn't dare sleep. He kept his new ears on a swivel, and sure enough, heard the tell-tale click of the nutcracker opening his jaw before he spoke.

"You are my creator," he said bluntly.

Shang Qinghua made an affirmative noise, but said nothing else. Was the nutcracker mad for the way his life had been written? Sorry prince, nice childhoods made for boring backstories!

"Why?"

Shang Qinghua opened his eyes and asked, "Why what?"

"Why have you created me?"

The nutcracker did not sound particularly existential or lamenting, nor angry—merely curious. It was a bit of a silly question,

Shang Qinghua supposed, tilting his head back. Why did anyone make anything? Most of his works were made for money at this point, though that wasn't the reason behind the inception of the ice prince. If he had to pinpoint a reason...he made the story for himself. A lonely prince, not to share with others, but to keep close to his heart.

"Well," Shang Qinghua said, "they say authors put a little of themselves into everything they write and, hm, that was true with you. Maybe you won't find it so similar but—ahhh, nevermind."

"No. Continue," the nutcracker commanded. His painted eyes focused on Shang Qinghua so completely, it felt impossible to disobey.

"I just—well. Being an orphan, believe it or not, has a bit of an effect on you!" Shang Qinghua blurted. "It's not thrilling to know that someone somewhere out there didn't think you were worth keeping around, before you even had the chance to prove otherwise! And my uncle—he's not even my real uncle—but like, he's never around! And he's weird about it!"

Emboldened by the nutcracker's attentive gaze, Shang Qinghua rambled faster, "So yeah, I made a little prince who gets left by his parents, and gets left by his uncle, and he's so cool and untouchable that he just goes on living like that, but like, he's soft under all that! But he can't trust anyone with that interior! And that's like, an exaggeration of my life, because at least I have siblings. And I have a warm house, and no one wants to kill me, especially not my uncle. I don't have it that bad. But I wanted-it hurts, y'know? Of course you know. You've got it all worse, but that's kinda the point—I created you to make me feel better. Or maybe just for me? Pretty narcissistic either way, if you think about it. Probably should've just stuck to what I knew how to write. Maybe then this whole mess wouldn't have happened."

"What did you write?" the nutcracker asked.

"...Erotica."

The nutcracker's mouth didn't allow for smiling, stiffly carved as it was, but his amused air gave the impression of curling lips.

"I'm glad you did not make me the focus of a promiscuous tale," he said.

Shang Qinghua closed his eyes and kicked his feet with a huff, emboldened by the nutcracker's calm demeanor. He pouted. "You're making fun of me."

"Yes."

"At least pretend to deny it!"

A shadow passed over Shang Qinghua's face—a hand, he realized a beat too late. He cringed in preparation to be hit, certain he'd been too cheeky, but the blow never came. Just a gentle pressure on his head, sifting through the fur. Hair, actually—for some reason he still had hair.

The nutcracker seemed embarrassed when Shang Qinghua blinked up at him, but he simply said, "You did well. Thank you."

"For what?" Shang Qinghua said, mildly incredulous. "Giving you an awful life? You've been awfully calm about the whole 'being a character someone wrote thing,' by the way."

"It's a kinder thing, to know that the cruelties of one's fate had a reason. It pleases me that I gave my creator some value. So I thank you," the nutcracker said. Shang Qinghua waved him off, caught between being self-conscious and pleased. He had nothing to say in the face of such uncharacteristic bald-faced sincerity, so he said nothing at all, and rolled over to press his face into the duvet. Sincere emotions, who needed them! There were far more important things to worry about.

Like turning back into a human! The nutcracker seemed oddly content to hover over Shang Qinghua and let him handle the process, so handle it he would. Rubbing his cheek fluff into the fabric, he mulled over the owl's words. It had told him that in order to turn back, he would need to follow the rules of his own story—as well as find this...Sugar Pear Princess or whatever. However, the owl had called that particular quest the "Call to Adventure." And he was not, under any circumstances, going on any adventures, thank you very much. He had a sneaking suspicion it would have to do with going through that rat hole. Not happening. So he set that objective aside and focused on the first one.

The rules of his story...hmm. He hadn't really done any strong world-building for the story of the ice prince, to be honest. Hadn't set up a magic system or established the culture or anything. What would the rules of that story be? It was unlike everything he wrote before...

He sat bolt upright.

"I used to write erotica!" he shrieked, whipping around to stare at the nutcracker.

The nutcracker tilted his head, which was unfortunately endearing on such a menacing figure. Shang Qinghua scrabbled to his feet, tripped over a wrinkle in the fabric, and made his way to where the nutcracker sat. With Shang Qinghua standing and the nutcracker sitting, they were almost eye-to-eye for once. Almost;

Shang Qinghua was actually eye-level with the nutcracker's mouth, which he eyed with trepidation.

"I just...want to try something," he said, wringing his little paws. "Please don't kill me for it or something."

Then he leaned forward and placed a fuzzy, dainty kiss on the seam of the nutcracker's mouth, where the moving lower jaw met the rest of his head. The wood was cool on Shang Qinghua's lips, which took him by surprise. He jerked back to peer at the nutcracker's face.

The nutcracker stared back, made mute with his own surprise it seemed. Shang Qinghua felt his heart sink, for there appeared to be no change in either of them, but—wait! Upon closer inspection, the nutcracker's wooden hair had taken on a new texture, as though a sculptor had chiseled into it to give the illusion of individual strands. And Shang Qinghua found his gaze now level with the nutcracker's boldly formed nose. He'd grown, if only a little!

"A kiss? That is the solution?" the nutcracker said, raising a simply articulated hand to pat at his face.

"Uh. Sort of?" Shang Qinghua laughed, high pitched. "So, funny story. Do you know how easy it is to churn out sexy stories when all the problems in them are solved by...intimacy?"

The nutcracker paused to process this and then stated, rather crudely, "You wish to have sex?"

"I don't wish to have sex with you!" Shang Qinghua cried. "Or, I guess, I wouldn't say no—but that's not the point! Don't get me wrong, you're very handsome, even made of wood, so—so it's not a matter of attraction, it's just. Not the main reason! Not that it

isn't a good one. Just. You know."

Shang Qinghua deflated at the end of his outburst. Humiliating! He let his body sink back onto its haunches (like a squat, but weird). The gaze of the nutcracker on his neck prickled like ice, even as Shang Qinghua felt his face flush beneath the fur.

"I just think that it will grant us our bodies back," he grumbled.

Without pause, the nutcracker replied, "I believe you."

Shang Qinghua gaped; but there was no lie in the nutcracker's voice, and earnestness shone through in his unwavering gaze.

"Well, that's—good. Very good. Thank you."

"Mn."

"So I'll just"—Shang Qinghua gestured vaguely between them—"until we're big enough that we can do, uh."

He gestured again.

Why was it so hard to say sex?! Who was he, Shen Yuan? May the gods have mercy on his soul, he hasn't been this awkward since he was in school and constantly staring at other boys' shoulders obsessively. Something about the way the nutcracker accepted his word so easily just got him all hot under the collar, and that piercing stare didn't help either. Or that deep, woodgrain voice. Mmm.

Determined not to sell himself short in comparison, Shang Qinghua bluntly added, "Just so you know, you're in for a treat. My ass is a thing of wonders."

Without missing a beat, the nutcracker responded, "I know."

"You do??"

"While your form was changing, before you shrunk, you stood over me," he said without an ounce of shame. "You are wearing a nightgown. I could see all of you from below."

Oh! This—This scoundrel, this beast of a man-nutcracker-thing!! Nervousness obliterated by righteous indignation, Shang Qinghua lurched forward and planted another kiss on the nutcracker's mouth. He dug his little claws into the nutcracker's shoulders, and hoped that when they transformed back there were little holes in the uniform. See how he liked a little indignity!

One couldn't exactly make out with a muzzle and a mechanical jaw, so Shang Qinghua made do with peppering little kisses on the nutcracker's face and sliding his body up close, a loose enactment of intimacy. He hoped it would be enough for whatever convoluted rules this so-called world functioned by. The nutcracker's hands came up to grasp at Shang Qinghua's back, and one hooked under his furry ass to give him a shelf of leverage as the nutcracker stood up. Weight supported by his shameless partner, Shang Qinghua was able to lean forward and press a kiss to the nutcracker's forehead mark. It was even cooler than the rest of the wood, like a breath of minty fresh air. The nutcracker's jaw creaked at the contact, as though the mere touch was arousing, and he pulled Shang Qinghua away.

Opening his eyes—he hadn't even realized he'd closed them—Shang Qinghua blinked down at the nutcracker. Both of them were bigger now, as Shang Qinghua could see the bottom of the bed frame at eye level in his periphery. The nutcracker's face was more defined, carved from the usual simple shape into something with an approximation of cheekbones and a jawline. And a neck,

lucky him. Shang Qinghua could feel his own limbs lengthening a little, pulling his rodent's body from something "realistic" into something more "anthropomorphic."

He made to kiss at the nutcracker's neck, only to be stopped by his rich timbre.

"My name," he said, "is Mobei-Jun. I wished you to know. And you, little author?"

Mouth dry, Shang Qinghua replied with his own name. He could forgive a little upskirt peeping if Mobei-Jun's voice continued to be this deep and reverberant.

Formalities settled, he dove back in to press his lips to Mobei-Jun's neck. He closed his eyes again—actively watching their bodies elongate and warp back to normal felt like a mood-killer. Still, he kept his hands on Mobei-Jun's shoulders, and thus felt the very moment that textured wood crumbled into proper strands of dense, lush hair. He also felt the moment that the hands under his ass gained articulated fingers, for they suddenly groped into the plushness of his plump posterior. He felt his face begin to flatten, no longer protruding enough that he could see his nose, and that made kissing a good deal filthier. Finally he could use his tongue without feeling like a pet licking its master.

(He did, in fact, feel his leg joints returning to the human positioning, and very tactfully ignored it for the sheer bonerkiller sensation it produced.)

Mobei-Jun began to reciprocate as well. He still could not kiss very well, having no lips, but his newly formed hands were dexterous and exploratory. He groped at every inch of Shang Qinghua's thighs and waist, wooden fingers nearly bruising with the strength of their grip. When his hands slid underneath the nightgown, Shang Qinghua exhaled softly; when his tail was squeezed,

he squeaked. Mobei-Jun massaged the root of the tail, near Shang Qinghua's spine, sending little zings of pleasure down to his little clawed fingertips.

Then a finger carefully prodded at Shang Qinghua's hole, which was *very* strange. He sharply gasped and fisted a handful of Mobei-Jun's hair. The finger circled, slowly adding more pressure, as though giving the furled hole a massage. Though unlubricated, the finger eventually sunk in; it seemed Shang Qinghua's, uh, *experiments* with his own fingers carried over to this half-form.

It still stung, without petroleum jelly to ease the way. Just the tip of that wooden finger, so unlike one made of flesh, with no give to clench down on and soothe the ache. Shang Qinghua tugged on Mobei-Jun's hair, prompting a grunt in response.

He wanted more.

Carefully shifting, he managed to cram a little more of Mobei-Jun's finger inside. It nipped little bites of pain with the stretch, and he relished it amidst the warmth of arousal and the coolness of Mobei-Jun's wooden skin. The finger was bigger than two of his own, with their sizes still so dramatically different, and so it would not sink past the second knuckle without the aid of lubricant. Shang Qinghua petulantly tried to make Mobei-Jun force it in (the quicker they were prepped, the quicker they could get to the real thing) by pulling on his hair again, but he wouldn't be moved. What was he, worried about Shang Qinghua's comfort? Wild.

"Shang Qinghua," Mobei-Jun rumbled when Shang Qinghua's wriggling got more intense. The scolding went ignored.

Eventually, Shang Qinghua managed to work his way down to the last knuckle. But to his disappointment, he didn't feel fuller.

In fact, it seemed that although the finger was deeper inside, the stretch of Shang Qinghua's rim had lessened. The finger was smaller.

He opened his eyes.

Mobei-Jun's supremely handsome face greeted him. Now here was the stoic ice prince that he had so lovingly crafted! Everything about his features—his eyes, his brows, his cheeks, his nose, his chin-was boldly carved, as though from stone and not wood, thick and hard-edged. The flinty ice blue of his eyes was piercing. He was very large, even as Shang Qinghua realized that they were more correctly proportioned now (Shang Qinghua would probably at least reach Mobei-Jun's shoulders now, if they were standing). His shoulders were broad and corded with muscles. His chest, which Shang Qinghua's hands slipped down to grope, was...delightfully ample.

Shang Qinghua did notice one significant problem, even as he surreptitiously stretched his human-again legs. They were not quite all the way there yet. No soft skin graced Mobei-Jun's body, still constructed of wood; Shang Qinghua's ears still felt quite large and fuzzy and unnaturally flexible, and Mobei Jum's palm still rested on a conspicuous tail on Shang Qinghua's rear.

"All the way it is," Shang Qinghua muttered.

That wasn't to say he was disappointed—merely, he'd hoped Mobei-Jun would be made of flesh for this part. Fingers were one thing, but—he peered down the plane of Mobei-Jun's torso. There was a bulge beneath his uniform. How it formed, anatomically, Shang Qinghua had no clue; but when he ground down on it, it was rock hard. Wood hard. Whatever.

"Right. Put me down, we're gonna need

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the jelly, and a lot of it. It's in the top drawer there."

Mobei-Jun slipped his finger out, but didn't put Shang Qinghua down. It was dizzily arousing, the way he was able to support Shang Qinghua's full weight with one arm while he walked over to the dresser and rummaged around in the drawer. When he pulled out the glass jar, he quirked a brow at Shang Qinghua—it was nearly half gone already.

"Busy?" Mobei-Jun asked, amusement veiled beneath his deep tone.

"Writing is a very stressful job," Shang Qinghua said primly. Yes, he stuck his fingers up his ass once a day every day, what about it?

Mobei-Jun laughed. It was heady and rich, and took Shang Qinghua by surprise so much that he almost missed the finger sliding back inside him. The fact that it was oily and smooth certainly helped, too. Shang Qinghua had enjoyed the sting of the stretch, but truly there was no comparison to the rich feeling of having a finger pump inside him with little resistance. It was so different from when he did it to himself, stroking him and prodding him in unexpected little ways. Very quickly, Mobei-Jun was able to add more, until Shang Qinghua found himself nearly fit to burst with four wooden fingers crammed inside his clenching hole.

"Do it," he panted, drooling onto Mobei-Jun's neck. In his stupor, he found a private little joy in the fact that Mobei-Jun's coat did, in fact, have little holes ripped into the shoulders. "I want it inside."

The fingers slid out with little resistance, and there was a slight shuffling as Mobei-Jun slicked his own cock with a wet noise. And then—sweet pressure, the weight of an unyielding thickness pressed against

flesh. Unstoppable force meeting a very moveable object. Mobei-Jun murmured a soothing noise, angled his hips, and fed his cock into Shang Qinghua's accepting body.

For the first moment, it was unbearable. The lack of softness left Shang Qinghua's insides fluttering, pressed aside by the weight of a heavy wooden cock. He knew that false phalluses were sold, if you knew where to look, and had even written about them; he imagined they felt very much like the one inside him now, though surely none would dare approach the sheer girth of Mobei-Jun. It was deliriously unforgiving.

Then, like a spell being broken, Mobei-Jun bottomed out and the wooden cock gave way to hot flesh. Mobei-Jun's body returned to normal just in time for his balls to slap against Shang Qinghua's ass.

Shang Qinghua came, just like that, never having touched his own cock at all.

He shook through his orgasm as Mobei-Jun found his own pleasure in Shang Qinghua's soft body. A body which, he noticed through the overstimulated aftershocks, was *almost* back to normal; his ears felt small once again, but there were strange confounding lines racing up and down his limbs now! He balked at them in confusion as his body was rocked in Mobei-Jun's arms. They were delicate and frost-like, and glowed, and were the color of—

"Plums!" he hissed between thrusts, which punched his breath out. "It was—Sugar Plum Fairy! The name! Stupid hack...ow!!"

Mobei-Jun grunted, and his hips shuddered to a halt inside Shang Qinghua as he came. It was curiously cold (and deeply heady; it filled Shang Qinghua so well), but he had no mind for that. He absently patted Mobei-Jun on the head as they caught their breaths.

"Stupid fucking bird, haaa," he groused. "Making me the Sugar Plum Fairy. Why tell me to go look for it if it was just going to be me all along?! Damn thing probably had a whole adventure in mind about me learning to value myself along the way. I *hate* that trope, everyone does. This is why you leave the writing to the professionals."

"Yes, Qinghua," Mobei-Jun hummed agreeably, still breathing deeply. Ahh, he may have been an upskirt-peeping tom, but at least he knew when to listen! What a sweet man.

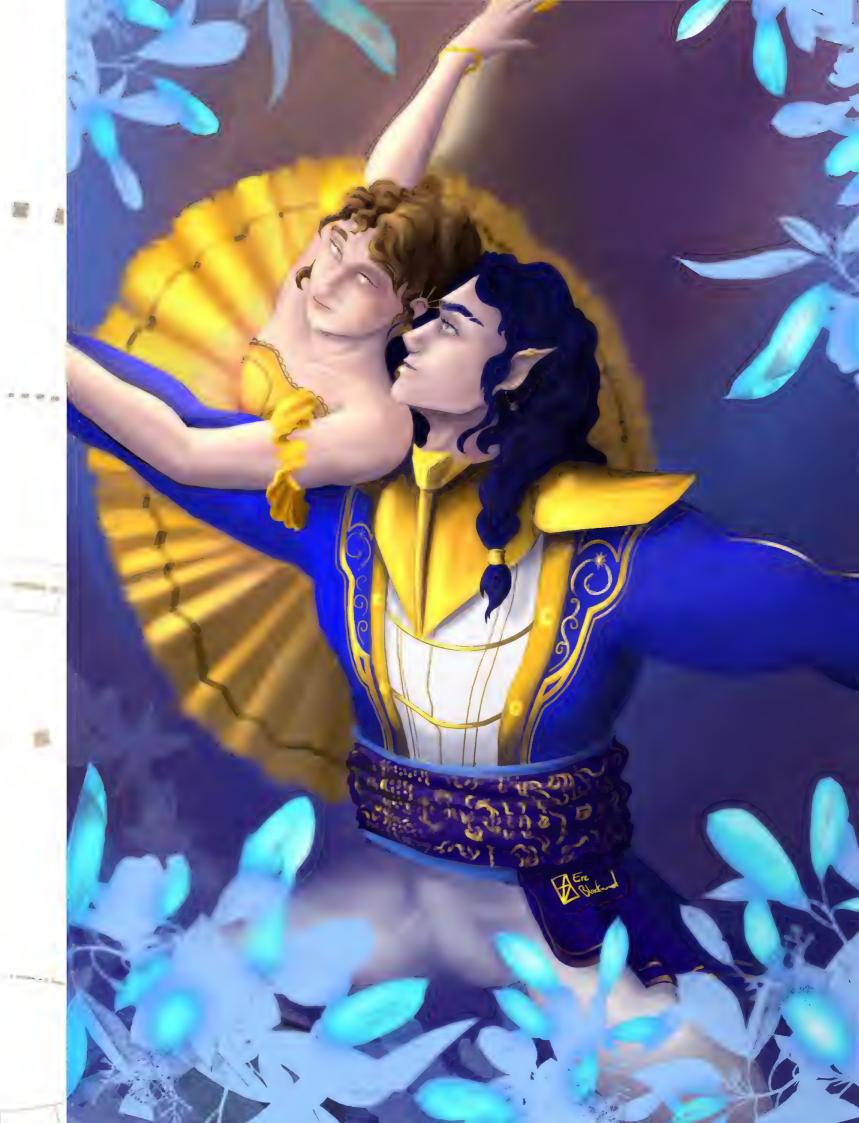
Shang Qinghua's door slammed open.

Qi Qingqi took them in; half-naked, Mobei-Jun with his cock still buried inside a faintly glowing Shang Qinghua, both disheveled.

"Hua-ge's having sex with a strange man!" she turned and yelled, somewhere between horror and snitch's delight. "And he has *tattoos!*"

As the sounds of the household rousing from sleep into an outraged stampede ramped up, Shang Qinghua sighed and buried his head in Mobei-Jun's sexy shoulder.

Maybe Sugar Plum Fairies could turn annoying siblings into hamsters.



THE STORYTELLER'S HUSBAND

Rating:

Explicit

Relationships

Mobei Jun/Shang Qinghua

Characters

Mobei Jun, Shang Qinghua

Tags

1001 Arabian Nights AU, Trans Male Character, Trans Shang Qinghua, Cunnilingus/Oral Sex, mixed language for afab anatomy, Arranged Marriage

Summary

Mobei-Jun, King of the Northern Desert, is known throughout both human and demon realms for wedding brides—only to execute them the next day so that they might never betray him. When Shang Qinghua becomes the latest in a long line of ill-fated brides, he must use all his wits to stay alive and avoid a similar fate.

Author:

BAOBEIJUNS

Illustrated by:

BETH AD ASTRA

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, there lived a humble washerwoman and her adopted son. The boy was small and gangly and the washerwoman terribly poor, her hands crooked and split from years of doing laundry. They had little food and less money, but as long as they had each other, their days were filled with simple happiness.

Shang Qinghua steps from the carriage, his long, red robes heavy and stifling. The air is frigid cold, the paving stones glossy with black ice. The great Northern Palace is little more than a haze of red through the thin crimson fabric of his veil. He lifts it out of the way, a cold sweat sticking under his clothes and cold nipping at his exposed cheeks. He drops it back into place and the precious gemstones that drip from the edges chime against each other, their cheerful tinkling making a mockery of his despair.

From behind the veil, the steps up to the grand gates look as though they stretch on forever—as sombre and cold as the dread

in his gut—as he takes his first step towards his wedding.

Shang Qinghua fully expected a pared-down ceremony, especially given the short notice—but the wedding gifts that turned up at the family estate that morning were mind-boggling in splendour and scope, nothing short of what a bride far higher than his calibre would demand.

Robes spun from Glacial Cave Spider silk and accented with gold, huge quantities of incense, six roasted suckling pigs, and more solid gold jewellery than Shang Qinghua has ever seen in his life, including the heavy bangles adorning his wrists and the fine golden headpiece in his hair. Mobei-Jun had sent a customary lai see for the sake of tradition, but the envelope itself was empty—Shang Qinghua's bride price came instead in a heavy sandalwood chest, the quantity too great to fit into a single packet.

It's a small price to pay for a life.

It's testament to Mobei-Jun's vast wealth that he's managed to maintain such ostentatious grandeur for every wedding. The court, however, has clearly seen it all before. The after-ceremony festivities are lively and indulgent, and the guests throw



themselves into the celebrations with fervour—but Shang Qinghua can hardly miss the tense undercurrent that runs through his wedding feast.

Seated beside his royal husband, Shang Qinghua feels more like one of the fine suckling pigs Mobei-Jun delivered to his father's estate than a bride.

The one person who *doesn't* look at him is his husband.

Mobei-Jun sits at the centre of the high table and gazes out over the festivities with as much life as a stone lion, his jaw firmly set and his eyes for everyone except Shang Qinghua. Not a glance. Not even once—not since the ceremony when he'd lifted the veil from his face, when they'd faced each other and bowed three times, when they'd interlocked arms and shared a cup of wine.

The brief moment their eyes met had made Shang Qinghua shiver, like the cold in that glare had shot a ribbon of ice straight into the marrow of his bones. Mobei-Jun's gaze was frigid, fathomless, totally inscrutable—and yet Shang Qinghua got the profound impression that he had immediately been found wanting.

He picks listlessly at his food. The last hours of his life and he can't even enjoy them, wedged between Mobei-Jun and a demon he doesn't know, and surrounded by an ice cold court who barely know his name.

Shang Qinghua gazes mournfully at the table, groaning under the weight of its bounty, and quietly sets his chopsticks down beside his barely-touched bowl. He picks at the highly embroidered sleeve of his wedding robe. It's cold as balls in here, even though the reception hall is full to bursting with warm, living bodies. Shang Qinghua sneaks a sidelong glance at Mobei-

Jun. Well. Mostly warm.

This is going to be a very, very long night.

But the happiness didn't last. One day the washerwoman fell sick. She was no longer able to take any laundry, and the pair soon ran out of money. The boy was a devoted son and diligently cared for his mother. "Mother," he asked, "what do you want to eat? I'll make it for you."

With no money for food, the boy resolved to take leftover congee from the kitchens of the lord. He was caught by some serving boys on the way out. "Stop!" they said, "That congee is ours!" They beat him until he was black and blue, forcing him to bark like a dog before they would let him go. The boy ran and ran, racing all the way home—but by the time he made it, his mother's spirit had already passed.

The furnishings in Mobei-Jun's room are muted, washed out by golden candlelight. It would be beautiful if it weren't so cold.

Shang Qinghua huddles into himself miserably, hopping from one foot to another as much as he dares to keep the cold from seeping into his tired bones. He'd known, of course, that he'd be expected to spend the night with his new, terrifying, glacial husband, but a part of him had still hoped otherwise. It's not like any part of this is normal. Shang Qinghua lingers aimlessly in the centre of the room, feeling a lot like a mouse making its home in a tiger's lair.

The sound of chamber doors closing raises the hairs on the back of his neck. The tiger approaches.

Shang Qinghua squeaks with surprise when he turns towards the door and comes face-to-face with a broad chest—that's a *lot* of chest—as solid and unyielding as the cliffs that the Northern Palace teeters on. Mobei-Jun glares down at him with disdain, his lip curling.

Back in the human realm, Shang Qinghua had heard that the King of the Northern Desert's stare could kill a man. It must be his good fortune that that's not true, or else the ice in Mobei-Jun's gaze would freeze him solid.

His husband sweeps past and deposits himself languidly amongst the heaps of pillows, leaving Shang Qinghua shivering on his feet. His flinty gaze sweeps his newest prize up and down.

"Are you just going to stand there?"

"...Dawang?"

"It's our wedding night," Mobei-Jun says curtly, "what do you have to offer me?"

Oh, gods. Shang Qinghua gawps at him. Does Mobei-Jun expect sex? The guy is hot—or, rather, cold, so, so cold, like every one of Shang Qinghua's wettest dreams manifested and deep frozen—but he also looks like he could snap him in half. Unsexily. He's not sure he can even perform under these circumstances. Surely this marriage doesn't need to be consummated...or is that Mobei-Jun's weird, demon kink? Fucking brides and then killing them? Shang Qinghua's brain speedruns through hundreds of horrifying possibilities.

Mobei-Jun's beautiful eyes narrow into slits.

"Do you play sweet music?" he prompts.

"No"

"Do you paint beautiful landscapes?"

"...No."

"Do you dance?"

Shang Qinghua shrinks into himself, his cheeks burning with humiliation. "No."

"Then what exactly can you do to please me?"

It's a question, but it sounds like judgement summarily passed. Shang Qinghua feels ready to vomit, ready to cry. It's looking more and more like tomorrow's schedule starts with an early morning execution, followed by a light breakfast and maybe a spot of remarriage.

The rims of his eyes burn. He's a fourth son—not a particularly distinguished one, at that—not some highly-trained courtesan or a noble lady well-versed in the wifely arts!

"Well? Is there anything you can do?" Mobei-Jun snaps.

"S-Stories! I tell stories!" Shang Qinghua blurts.

"Stories?"

"Stories," Shang Qinghua repeats stupidly. "Fairy tales. Fables. That sort of thing."

Mobei-Jun cocks his head with a frown—but the frown is softer this time, contemplative rather than scornful. Or rather, Shang Qinghua *thinks* it is, because he's pretty sure none of the muscles in Mobei-Jun's face have actually moved. "So you're a wordsmith?"

Shang Qinghua tries not to grimace.

Wordsmithery might be a little... *generous* for his regular fare, but he's grasping at straws here. If it takes a wordsmith, then a wordsmith he will be. He nods.

Mobei-Jun tips his chin up imperiously and reclines back against the pillows. "Well then, storyteller. Speak."

Fuck. Okay. That...actually worked. Shang Qinghua steels his shaken nerve and sheepishly crawls onto the edge of the bed, perching as far away from the demon as he dares. He takes a deep breath.

"Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, there lived a humble washerwoman and her adopted son..."

After burying his mother, the young boy decided to pursue his fortune as a cultivator. His body was weak, but he was filled with innate ability. He left his old home and travelled for miles to seek a master in the famed Twelve Peaks of Cang Qiong.

The boy was a prodigal, once-in-a-millenium talent, but this very talent drew the envious eye of the boy's vain and arrogant shizun. The Peak Lord resented the boy's cultivation and his budding friendship with his only female disciple, whom he had raised and coveted for himself.

The devious villain resolved to sabotage the boy with false manuals and regular beatings. Only the boy's exceptional ability kept him from this terrible fate—but every improvement worsened his punishment, and every strike of the whip slowly blackened his heart.

"...And so the evil Peak Lord accepted the prodigy as his disciple," Shang Qinghua finishes. The candles in Mobei-Jun's chambers are burned to stubs, their lights flickering and low. He gives a few harsh swallows and tries to soothe his raw throat, his tongue like sandpaper. Mobei-Jun blinks at him as if awakening from a trance.

"Wait," he protests, "I want to know what happens after he reaches the sect. That's not a story."

"It's not the end," Shang Qinghua says.

"Then stay and finish it."

"..." Shang Qinghua shakes his head. "The night grows long, Dawang. You'll have to wait until tomorrow. Didn't your mother ever tell you bedtime stories?"

Mobei-Jun scowls. Shang Qinghua supposes that's his answer. He'd feel a little sorry for him if it weren't for the fact that both of them know that Shang Qinghua will never see another sunset. Mobei-Jun won't get his ending. It's a petty victory at best, but petty victories are all he has left.

By the time Shang Qinghua retires to the Consort's quarters, midnight has already come and gone.

He plummets face-first into the pillows without disrobing—but despite his bone-deep exhaustion, he can't find any peace. All he can think about is which unfortunate wife slept in this bed the night before, only to be executed the very morning that Shang Qinghua had been making his approach. He wonders whether his own corpse will be returned to his family, or whether he belongs to an ice-cold and indifferent

Mobei-Jun even in death.

He drifts, dissociating more than sleeping, until, with detached resignation, he realises that he can hear birdsong outside his window.

Well, he thinks, that's it then. It doesn't feel real. In a few hours, if that, he will walk out to his death—although, actually, he's not sure how that goes. No one has told him the details. He slides off the bed, onto the floor, and stares off into nothing.

He never got to try the roast duck last night. He pats his stomach, then squeezes it, imagining the salty, crispy skin—the thick, creamy layer of fat between the skin and the meat, the rich, gamey flavour. He only has a little stomach, after all, it wouldn't have taken much to fill it, and maybe it would serve Mobei-Jun right if he vomited his guts out just before he died.

He starts to giggle, and then he can't stop laughing—because if he doesn't laugh, he'll cry—laughing because he never got to try the duck and it's his favourite.

Shang Qinghua sits on the floor, swaying gently, until a brisk knock on the door brings him to his senses.

"Consort Shang," comes a voice he doesn't recognise, "Junshang awaits your presence."

His empty, withered stomach sinks a little further. He hadn't expected to have to face Mobei-Jun before he died. A part of him wants to refuse. He has nothing to lose but face, and it's not like he had much of that to begin with. Why should he go quietly?! Mobei-Jun should have to come here and scrape his body off the floor himself!

Shang Qinghua seethes with the thought as he follows the demon steward in silence. Okay, so he goes quietly. So what? He only goes because he's tired and hungry, and because he knows that Mobei-Jun would really do it.

His father's face probably matters too, although he's beyond caring. But he'll definitely be putting up a fuss later! Let no one say that Shang Qinghua got sent to his death like a pig to slaughter!

They end up outside the room that Shang Qinghua has spent more time in than his own in the brief time that he's been here. The lavishly appointed rooms look different in daylight. Last night, his view had largely been confined to the four posters of Mobei-Jun's bed. Beautifully intricate carpets woven with images of fantastic beasts in fine threads of blue and gold overlay the rich, dark wooden floors that gleam with polish. Sheer blue silks drape across the panelled windows and dull the edge of the frigid, icy air that lurks outside, casting the sunlight in a cool blue glow. Ornately carved furniture, fine lacquer, cavernous space at least thrice as large as his own bedroom in his father's estate—Shang Qinghua absorbs it all in awe as he steps over the threshold. And this is only the reception room!

"Junshang is dining in his chamber," comes the voice of the steward through the door.

Shang Qinghua grimaces, his feet dragging as he ventures into Mobei-Jun's inner sanctum. The king sits before a low table resplendent with food, the claw-carved feet practically groaning under the weight. It looks much like a smaller version of his wedding spread. In the centre of the table sits a bubbling hotpot cheerily piping out fragrant steam.

Such luxury appears to have little effect on Mobei-Jun's mood. The two make eye contact for the barest second and Shang Qinghua immediately regrets it. "Eat," Mobei-Jun commands, gesturing to the unused table setting opposite. Shang Qinghua looks from him down to the heavily laden table and back. Is this...his final meal?

And under the eyes of Mobei-Jun, too. Any other time the demon's icy glower would kill his appetite, but right now, Shang Qinghua is hungry enough to eat a horse.

He loads his bowl with dumplings, braised duck, stewed mushrooms and cold jelly, and fills the bubbling hot pot in the centre of the small table with noodles and lotus root. He barely ate yesterday, and the first explosion of flavour that hits his tongue is nearly enough to make him cry. Mobei-Jun watches him in silence until Shang Qinghua has finished his first bowl and is busy helping himself to a second.

"It's tomorrow," he says as Shang Qinghua ladles broth into his bowl. "Finish the story."

He freezes with his spoon hovering over the hotpot. Mobei-Jun stares at him expectantly. Honestly, Shang Qinghua hasn't even thought about the story since last night. It isn't even one of his better ones—he just made it up as he went along. He finishes topping up his bowl and sits back. Mobei-Jun doesn't strike him as the kind of man who's accustomed to being told no, and Shang Qinghua has already denied him once.

But then...if Mobei-Jun gets his ending, what use does he have for this poor, sacrificial husband?

Shang Qinghua takes his time selecting a plump mushroom from one of the dishes. He pops it in his mouth and chews slowly. "I can't."

Mobei-Jun inhales sharply. "Why not?" he

demands.

"Bedtime stories are for bedtime," Shang Qinghua protests, "you'll have to wait until this evening."

The petulant king glares at him and Shang Qinghua's guts quiver, but he stands his ground. His grip on his chopsticks turns white with the effort when Mobei-Jun opens his mouth to argue and he cuts him off:

"A storyteller needs time to work his craft, Dawang. I could make up some ending now if you force me, but you won't be satisfied. Wait until tonight and I'll have the whole day to make a good story."

Mobei-Jun's eyes narrow further, but his mouth snaps shut nonetheless. He curtly picks up his chopsticks, his jaw set, and begins putting food in his bowl with more force than necessary. Shang Qinghua raises his bowl to his mouth and sips his broth to hide his small, triumphant smile. Fine. Let him throw his little tantrum. Whatever it takes for Shang Qinghua to see the end of the day.

"Tonight," Mobei-Jun snaps, "you will finish the story."

Shang Qinghua nods obediently, schemes already sprouting in his mind. When breakfast is over, he scurries back to his bedroom and orders ink and paper from the servant. Then he scrambles onto his bed and lets his hair loose, shoving aside the pillows until he reaches the bare wood of the bed frame. At the very least, he won't be being executed today. That's one day more than he thought he had. He takes the sharp end of his hairpin and carves one single, lonely notch into the headboard.

The boy begged and begged with tears in his eyes, but his villainous shizun wasn't moved; he harboured a deep hatred for the boy, and he was glad to be rid of him. All around them the yawning chasm that split Juede Valley spat fire and sulphur.

"Now I see your true colours," he said, pushing him closer towards the edge and ignoring his pleas. Then, with a firm shove, he cast the half-demon into the Abyss.

"Why did the disciple not simply eat his evil shizun and become Peak Lord?"

"Wh-That's... not how it works."

"Why not? He could have digested his martial body and absorbed his power. That's how I became king."

Okay. Well. Shang Qinghua files that horrifying piece of information away for later.

Mobei-Jun continues, "The disciple should have killed his master and asserted his dominance, as all students eventually must. If he had been raised as a demon he would have known that, and his story wouldn't have ended so pathetically."

"Dawang, the story isn't finished."

"How could a scrawny half-demon possibly survive in the Endless Abyss?"

"You'll see ... tomorrow."

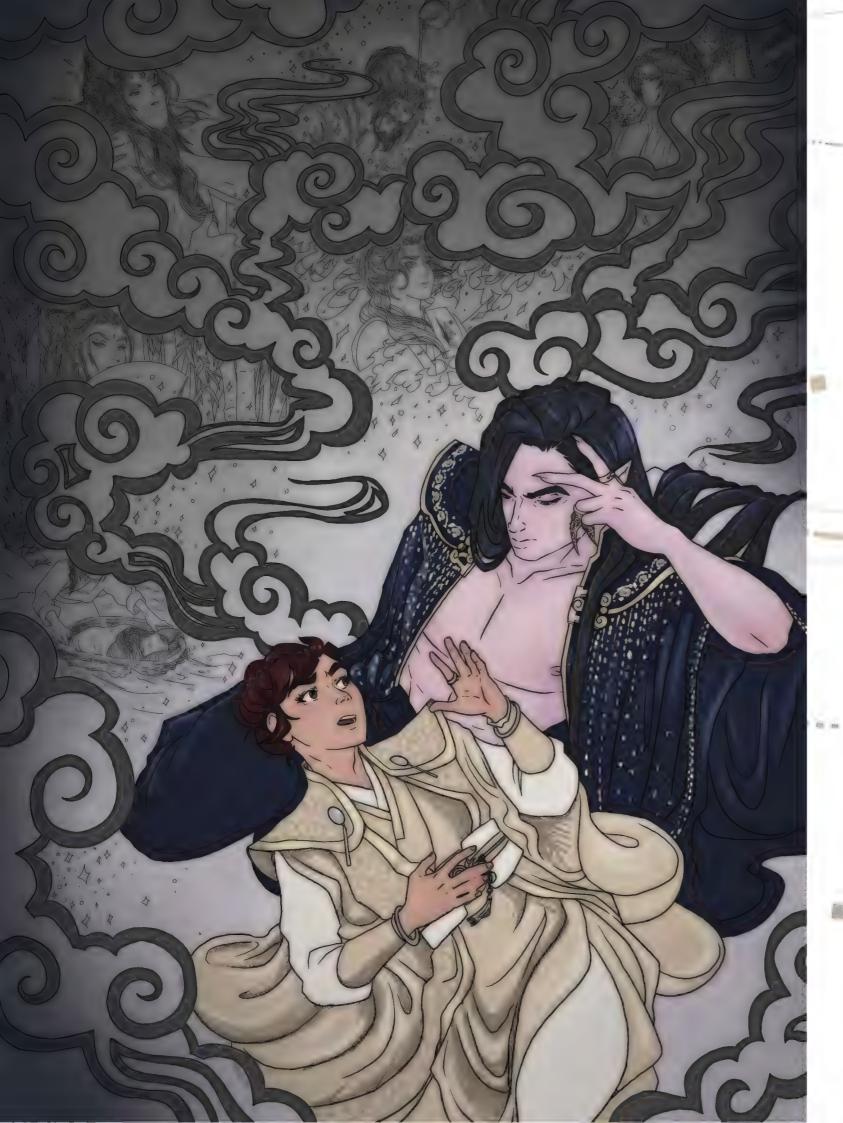
Many years passed with no sign of the boy until, gradually, the memory of him faded away. His evil shizun was happy to be rid of him and gladly pretended that he had been slaughtered by demons, comforting his young female disciple in her grief while coveting her in his heart.

Little did he know that the Abyss had awakened the boy's Heavenly Demon blood, accelerating his cultivation until it was far greater than his own. The boy fought his way tooth and claw through the horrors of the Abyss with nothing but his wits and his insatiable desire for vengeance.

Then one day, deep in the belly of an ancient beast, the boy stumbled across the poisoned chalice that would make his fortune. The Xin Mo sword was the stuff of myth and legend, bestowing its wielder with untold power—but it offered a dark exchange, feeding off the cultivation of whoever held it. Countless men had been driven to insanity by its insidious whispers, none of them strong enough to tame its lust for spiritual energy. The boy pulled Xin Mo from the bones of those who came before him, and the sword snuck its blackened tendrils into his mind.

For the first few days of his strange marriage, Shang Qinghua gets barely any sleep. When he can think, he preoccupies himself with planning, laying down manic drafts for the next phase of the story like a thing possessed—

When he can't, he sits on his bed consumed



with anxiety and waits for the axe to fall. Except it doesn't. One week goes by, then another, until somehow—miraculously—it's been several months and Shang Qinghua is still alive.

Every day, Shang Qinghua goes about his business; every night, he feeds Mobei-Jun a little more of the story and carves another notch on his bedpost. He buries his head in accounts, the part of Mobei-Jun's reign that his husband cares for the least. Outside of their nightly meetings, summons to breakfast, and sitting in on his court, Shang Qinghua does not see a lot of his husband. Perhaps Mobei-Jun is just forgetting about him.

The rest of the court, however, does not. Shang Qinghua starts to feel conspicuous with how he draws eyes wherever he goes. In the warmer months, the temperature lingers at a balmy handful of degrees above freezing—warm enough for Shang Qinghua to swaddle himself in furs and sit outside to write.

He chooses one of the smaller courtyards, nestling in amongst decorative demonic bushes that look half like artful landscaping and half like deadly weapons. Not that it does him any good. As soon as a clutch of noble ladies catch sight of him, they begin tittering amongst themselves from the veranda, sneaking glances at him when they think he's not looking.

His cheeks and ears burn, and not from the cold. He knows why they gossip. No other spouse has ever made it beyond the morning after, let alone as long as him. He suppresses a private little smile and loads his brush with ink. If only they knew that their formidable king spends his evening hanging on his every word while Shang Qinghua weaves a story of palace intrigue, of fantastic monsters and impossible escapes, until the fairytale hangs like a magnificent tapestry.

Fervent nights of passion? Bewitching Mobei-Jun with his sensual skills? Ha! The closest to passion that Shang Qinghua gets is when he drops in a steamy scene or two about the Demon Emperor and his latest conquest. Mobei-Jun loves those.

Shang Qinghua jots something down, then just as quickly scribbles it out again. Is the Emperor on his 35th wife, or was it his 36th? He can never remember. It doesn't matter—Shang Qinghua's golden protagonist son will push down 3,000 sisters if that's what it takes to keep him alive!

The fires at Cang Qiong Mountain Sect burned for days, the smoke for even longer. The first woman that the boy claimed for his harem was his childhood friend, the beloved disciple of his evil shizun. He remembered her kindness to him and spared her life while he rained down bloody vengeance on his former sect, taking her and another shimei renowned for her beauty as his wives. He turned his childhood friend into his Empress, and his childhood home into little more than a charred pile of corpses and ash.

In the end, it's not Mobei-Jun who shatters the illusion.

Shang Qinghua knows how the Palace whispers. He makes it his business to know. A favour here, a greased palm there, and he

soon has steady trickles of news filtering through to him all through the day. Most of it is inconsequential, banal; the ambassador from the South caused a stir with his dirty bed sheets, the Sha clan has a new Saintess. And some of it is not. If there's anything Shang Qinghua has learned from his father, it's that power is the smart man's game.

So when an offhand comment drops into his lap about how one of his itineraries appears to have been misplaced, he knows better than to chalk it up to human error. Or demon error, as the case may be. Shang Qinghua might be sheltered, but he's no fool.

He doesn't have to dig far. Demons are hardly known for their unwavering loyalty, their servants even less; a little carrot and stick and a reminder of who their king is and one Lord Wei's servants sing like canaries. He must not be well-liked. Shang Qinghua didn't even have to remove anything vital.

He sends Lord Wei's servants on their way with Mobei-Jun's seal of protection and some human trinkets for their troubles. Lord Wei takes no time to find in his dossier. Prominent at court until the death of his daughter, it was his youngest who'd found herself unfortunately wed—and unfortunately dead—by Mobei-Jun's hand.

Shang Qinghua has always heard that demons aren't much for trivial things like loving family relationships. Perhaps Lord Wei didn't get the payoff he'd been hoping for. In fact, his influence has been on the wane since... well, according to these documents, it would be right about the time that...

...Right around the time that Shang Qinghua was married.

Shang Qinghua slumps back in his seat with a grimace. He's always known that he slept

that first night in the bed of the bride who came before him. Now he knows which one.

It appears that Lord Wei knows how to hold a grudge. The more that Shang Qinghua digs, the more disturbing patterns come to light until he's staring down at nothing less than the sequence of Mobei-Jun's death. And his own, if he's not mistaken. Gods, he wants to be mistaken. Demons certainly don't do revenge by halves.

Shang Qinghua scratches his head with the butt of his pen. If Mobei-Jun died, wouldn't that be good for him? It's been months now, but the threat of being yet another number on the unsexiest of body counts is never far away. All it would take is one bad day and Shang Qinghua could end up as little more than a memorial tablet gathering dust. So many daughters far more esteemed than him have ended up that way at Mobei-Jun's behest, including Lord Wei's—he'd sympathise with the guy if his grudge against Mobei-Jun didn't also extend to Shang Qinghua as his longest-lived spouse.

Somehow, he gets the feeling that his sympathy is unwelcome.

Shang Qinghua has no intention of surviving Mobei-Jun only to fall at the hands of someone else. Between a father who gave him up to certain death, a husband who could execute him at any moment, and jealous lords who want his head in vengeance, Shang Qinghua's pickings are pretty slim.

Assassination would be the easiest solution. His fingers itch to send the order even as he thinks it—but something holds him back, a certain reluctance that reminds him of his position.

Demons are by no means squeamish about assassins—his king used to be one, after

all, travelling through the shadows to strike quick and fast without mercy. Shang Qinghua has heard tales of his cold ferocity. But Shang Qinghua is no demon, nor a treasured spouse. If Mobei-Jun heard that he'd been quietly ordering assassinations of seemingly loyal lords, wouldn't it be natural for him to start to question Shang Qinghua's value?

No. Shang Qinghua puts down his pen and steeples his fingers under his chin. He can't be the one to dispose of Lord Wei. His position is too fragile.

By the time that evening rolls around, the gears in his brain have spat out a tenuous solution. He makes his way to his husband's quarters with weak knees and sweaty palms. When he slips inside, the room is already hazy and perfumed with the smell of sweet cinnamon incense.

Shang Qinghua finds Mobei-Jun pacing in his bedroom. The moment that his husband catches sight of him, he drops expectantly onto his bed with an accusatory glare.

"You're late," he says.

"Sorry, Dawang," Shang Qinghua replies, eking out a comfortable nest for himself in the pillows. "I got caught up in paperwork." He keeps his distance today.

Mobei-Jun huffs. But he doesn't pry, just as Shang Qinghua expected—the fine details of Mobei-Jun's luxurious existence bore him to death, and Shang Qinghua's stories always have something far better to offer.

He clears his throat and picks up where he left off. "It had been only a few months since the wedding of the Demon Emperor to his newest wife, the humble huli jing, when trouble arose within the harem. Loyal servants became enemies, while enemies proved themselves loyal servants, and the foul winds of treachery blew through Huanhua Palace. The Emperor hastened to—"

Mobei-Jun scowls. "I thought that the Demon Emperor was hunting the Blue Mountain Copperhead Hydra?"

Shang Qinghua waves away his words impatiently. "He *was* doing that. He's taking a detour."

"How does he know about what's going on in the Palace?"

"..." Shang Qinghua despairs. Dawang, what's with all the attention to detail! Can't you just suspend your disbelief for two seconds so this beleaguered servant can save your life!

"One, uh...one of his wives called out to him in a dream! Yeah, that's good. She called out to him and he heard her using his dream powers. Then he cut a portal with Xin Mo and returned to Huanhua Palace."

Mobei-Jun looks less than satisfied, but he keeps his complaints to himself. He looks down pointedly at the space between them and then back up. Shang Qinghua pretends not to notice.

"As I was saying," Shang Qinghua says, "the Emperor hastened to his beloved wife's palace, where she sat with tears brimming in her beautiful fox eyes. Four fluffy tails surrounded her like clouds, and in her hand she clutched a single scrap of paper. 'Junshang, my beloved husband, this wife has stumbled across evidence of a conspiracy to overthrow you."

Mobei-Jun's pointed ears perk up. His gaze never wavers from Shang Qinghua while he speaks, but the drumming of his claws against his thigh and the way that he restlessly rolls a pillow tassel between the

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fingers and thumb of his right hand give away his excitement.

"'As your power grows, so does resentment towards you. Lord... *Pei* is enraged that you honoured such a lowly demon by taking her as a wife and now esteem her higher than his own daughter, who wastes away in your harem as if she were dead.'

"The huli jing showed the Emperor evidence of his documents being stolen, as well as Lord Pei's correspondence to his household. As the pieces slotted together, the Emperor kept his face calm, more a fox than the fox herself, even though he burned with rage. His wife illustrated how Lord Pei and his six closest confidants at court planned to converge on the Emperor in the courtyard the next morning and lure him into an array that would temporarily compromise his spiritual energy, then kill his beloved wife before him to push him into a qi deviation. These lords were individually powerful, and would combine their centuries of cultivation to kill the Emperor."

Mobei-Jun goes deathly still, his thumb pausing where it had been toying with the tassel. Shang Qinghua's stomach leaps into his throat. Fuck, fuck, he's messed up, he's overstepped, he's screwed, so screwed—

Mobei-Jun is on his feet quicker than Shang Qinghua's brain can even process the need to scramble away, his face like thunder. But he doesn't come for Shang Qinghua. He sweeps past, cloaked in a veil of killing intent so strong that even Shang Qinghua's negligible human cultivation can pick it up, and melts into the shadows quicker than the time between one blink and the next. Shang Qinghua's stomach hurts. He wraps his arms around his tummy, sitting alone in the middle of the vast, empty bed.

The evil Peak Lord spat out a mouthful of warm blood, glaring at the Demon Emperor through his one good eye. Even with both his arms reduced to stubs, his pride was too great to recognise the wound he had left in the Demon Emperor's heart. "I always knew that you were no more than a beast in child's clothing. I should have killed you when I had the chance."

There was not an ounce of regret in his voice, no shame whatsoever. The Demon Emperor realised, then, that his shizun truly was the worst kind of scum, an irredeemable villain, a man who would never renounce his wrongs.

He sighed and placed his hand on his shizun's leg. "Shizun, why don't we send the Sect Leader a gift?"

Shang Qinghua doesn't see the bloody outcome of his story. He doesn't need to. Mobei-Jun's reputation precedes him, and floods of whispers come pouring in until Shang Qinghua is inundated from the safety of his rooms—whispers of bodies found torn apart in their beds and the terrible cost of disloyalty.

Shang Qinghua shivers and burrows into his cloak more deeply, his breath fogging up the air before him. He snuffs out his last candle. Somehow, even though he knows it doesn't make any sense, the air always feels a little warmer when Mobei-Jun is around.

He hurries to his bedroom, his mind full of thoughts about the cosy, brick-heated bed and fluffy sheets that await him. Barely has he piled onto his bed, ready to burrow under the covers, that he contorts with a scream, two unwavering, luminous eyes watching him from the shadows. The darkness coils around itself until it becomes the solid form of a man.

"Dawang," Shang Qinghua breathes, "what the fuck."

Mobei-Jun cocks his head, his eyes shining unnaturally bright. Rust tinges the air, coppery and metallic.

"Tell me about the Blue Mountain Copperhead Hydra," he says.

"What?" Shang Qinghua asks intelligently. His pulse starts to jackhammer as Mobei-Jun saunters towards him in the dark, stalking out of the shadows and into the serrated shafts of moonlight.

"The Demon Emperor was searching for the Blue Mountain Copperhead Hydra," he says, "you never finished telling me about it."

"Oh. Um. Yeah, I guess I didn't. Do you—ah—okay haha you're really close now, Dawang—you want me to finish it now?"

"Mn," Mobei-Jun hums, dropping onto all fours and crawling up the bed. Shang Qinghua's mouth goes dry. Mobei-Jun's eyes never leave him, pinning him in place like he's a fine morsel just waiting to be devoured.

Shang Qinghua clears his throat. "Okay. Uh. After dealing with his enemies, the Demon Emperor spent many nights victoriously papapaing his beloved huli jing until her—okay, okay, fine, I'm getting to the hydra—ah, where was I... oh yeah, the Demon Emperor was deep in the mountains in search of his prey—"

Mobei-Jun pushes Shang Qinghua's robes aside without a thought, splaying his palms over exposed tracts of sensitive skin. Shang Qinghua jumps and trips over his words at first contact, the muscles in his inner thighs and abdomen jumping involuntarily.

"-ey, ah, uh—something something, following its tracks, uh, he came to a cave... a large cave from the outside, but inside it looked like a great boudoir carved from the natural lapis of the w-walls... inside he found not a hydra but a beautiful young woman clothed in snakeskin, her bare breasts heaving..."

Short, black nails and silver-tipped metal claws trace light, barely-there paths up his thigh and make it difficult to think. The pads of Mobei-Jun's fingers are cool against his warm skin, and the difference in temperature leaves tingling trails that linger with the feeling of his touch.

Mobei-Jun nuzzles into the soft pouch of his belly just above his mound, inhaling his scent. He nudges Shang Qinghua's legs wider and wider by increments until his whole bulk is neatly settled in between.

They're both breathing deeply for different reasons—Mobei-Jun doing... whatever he's doing, and Shang Qinghua on the verge of hyperventilating.

He balls his fists up in the silk sheets to stop them from visibly trembling while he tries to focus on telling the story, Mobei-Jun's wicked ministrations, and praying to whichever god smiled on him today all at once. He doesn't know if this is going where he thinks it's going, but if it's going, then it's going to drive him mad. He can already feel heat gathering between his spread legs, and it takes all he has to fight the urge to visibly squirm against the wetness starting to pool in his underwear.

Mobei-Jun is Shang Qinghua's husband. He's terrifying. He's everything Shang Qinghua could ever have conjured in his wildest, horniest dreams. He's *in between* his *legs*.

Shang Qinghua smothers his anxieties ruthlessly. Mobei-Jun *is* his husband, even if that's only in name. If his days are numbered, then he absolutely deserves to fuck his super hot, extremely scary spouse at least once! It's about time Mobei-Jun put his tongue to use and gave Shang Qinghua a little quid pro quo!

"Dawang, ah...it's really hard to concentrate when you do that..."

"Keep talking," Mobei-Jun commands.

"Yep, okay, sure. No problem. Not difficult to do at all. Where was I?"

"The Blue Mountain Copperhead Hydra is a busty woman," Mobei-Jun offers.

The tips of his metal claws dig into Shang Qinghua's plump thighs and hold them open, spreading his folds with his few unclawed fingers until Shang Qinghua unfurls before his hungry eyes. Mobei-Jun purses his lips and blows a steady stream of icy air against Shang Qinghua's bare slit.

"Hah!" Shang Qinghua yelps, immediately trying to close his thighs and curl around himself, but Mobei-Jun's uncompromising grip keeps his legs spread. The sudden change in temperature makes his body seize; the tickling, teasing gust of cold air against his dick makes his cunt weep. Mobei-Jun's keen, predatory eyes miss nothing, and it's both mortifying and dizzyingly hot to be laid waste before him like this.

Shang Qinghua watches Mobei-Jun's slit pupils dilate as they follow the stream of clear fluid that Shang Qinghua can feel dribbling from his hole and pooling onto the sheets. He blows cool air onto Shang Qinghua's cock again until he's squirming against fine silk, whimpering and mewling, his pussy overstimulated and desperate for touch all at once.

"Don't stop," Mobei-Jun grouses.

"That's—mn—that's *my* line," Shang Qinghua mumbles.

Mobei-Jun's tongue unfurls from his mouth, freakishly long, and that definitely shouldn't be as hot as it is and where the hell was he *hiding* that and Shang Qinghua doesn't care because suddenly it's on him, undulating from side to side up the whole length of his slit until his pussy is enveloped by slippery warmth.

It's both cooler than a tongue should be and warmer than he expected for an ice demon, just a tad below his body temperature like the shock of cold hands in winter. His thighs reflexively try to clamp shut around Mobei-Jun's head. His husband's tongue delves between his sticky lips and quickly locates his hole. Shang Qinghua's belly clenches involuntarily, jerking his shoulders off the bed, when the forked tip teases the sensitive rim of his cunt.

Then it thrusts inside him without decorum or warning, filling him in a fraction of a second. Shang Qinghua's back bows in a beautiful arch and he stuffs his mouth full of the bed sheets to muffle his helpless scream, biting down on priceless silk with all the force he can muster. It's unlike anything he's ever felt, the comparatively cool length of Mobei-Jun's tongue fighting against his internal heat as it strokes and searches and fills the walls of his cunt. It feels like cool relief, an icy panacea to the feverish heat making him pant and sweat.

Shang Qinghua braces a foot against Mobei-

Jun's shoulder for leverage, the studded bangles around his ankle tinkling, and tries his best to grind back against the softness of his tongue. He tries to forge on with the story, desperate not to give Mobei-Jun a reason to stop, but his narration descends into a babbling, delirious mess.

"Ah, ah! Dawang, I really can't, I—mmm, ah, mmm—I can't keep going..."

"Then don't," Mobei-Jun growls. Then he seals his lips around Shang Qinghua's chubby cock and sucks.

Shang Qinghua whites out, his cunt clenching around emptiness. He might be howling, or begging, he can't tell—his mouth is definitely moving, but the noises feel far away. His legs seize as he comes, the first hot gush of his climax soaking Mobei-Jun's lips and chin.

Guttural, baritone vibrations reverberate against his sensitive flesh when Mobei-Jun moans appreciatively. Shang Qinghua claps a hand over his mouth to stifle the frankly pathetic noises escaping his lips, but Mobei-Jun's prehensile tongue strokes him to overstimulation until he's twitching and whining.

Only when he smacks weakly at the demon's head does he stop, sitting up and wiping his mouth on the back of his arm. He watches Shang Qinghua through lazy, half-lidded eyes, his pupils devouring the ice blue of his irises.

Shang Qinghua mumbles wordlessly as he's enrobed in a pair of cool, strong arms, the temperature of Mobei-Jun's body soothing his overheated skin. He rubs his cheek against Mobei-Jun's chest without thinking, warm and fuzzy and satisfied.

"Dawang," he slurs sleepily, "I didn't get to the end of the story."

The sharp tips of Mobei-Jun's claws carefully thread through his hair, lightly massaging his scalp. Mobei-Jun huffs, the sudden cold gust of his breath tickling Shang Qinghua's cheeks.

"Finish it tomorrow."



TU'ER SHEN

Rating: Explicit

Relationships

shangqinghua/mobeijun

Characters

Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun, Shang Qinghua, Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe

Tags

Anal Sex, Top Shang Qinghua, Switching, Amnesia, Gegesexual, Oral Sex, Hybrid (Rabbit), Age Difference, Coveting and Obtaining, Sex Icon Shang Qinghua, Kissing

Summary

Did you know there's a hot spring on the moon? Also a rabbit. And a boy. A living boy.

Author:

LOACHPEARL

Illustrated by:

URANIUM DAME

"I'm hungry," the old man said, his voice quavering. "Oh, I'm so hungry."

To feed him, the other animals brought back vegetables, grains, even a lizard. But the rabbit, his own belly grumbling and grumbling, had nothing to offer. Nothing to give except—

"I offer myself," he said bravely, and made to leap onto the crackling fire.

The moon is a cold place.

Empty, too.

There's the little home the Emperor ordered to be built for Shang Qinghua; though the latter had protested it was too much, and nothing else.

Centuries later, Shang Qinghua is glad the Emperor hadn't listened. Living in a burrow might be what rabbits do, but none of the others do it for longer than the handful of years that is their kind's natural lifespan. And a mattress is so much better than sharp poky dried grasses and loose dirt that gets into his fur upon the slightest of contact and then doesn't get back out.

The moon would be hell for people who need people, but Shang Qinghua is neither a person nor the type of creature who needs others to be happy, and therefore is quite content. He has his snacks, a towering pile of novels to read at his leisure, enough paper to scribble his stories, and his task.

Ah, and the boy.

The dying boy, startlingly bright in the grey dust. His hair pooling like spilt ink,

drenched in his own life, as he sprawled across one of Shang Qinghua's favorite strolling routes.

Shang Qinghua stood over him, his heart stuttering as his nose drew in the scent of terror and exhaustion and betrayal. Trembling, he fought the urge to flee—and failed.

Who was he kidding? He wasn't made for death and danger! This situation was too much for a mere rabbit, however blessed!

But halfway home he stopped, unable to get the boy's face out of his mind. It was so pale, so startlingly white, all the color leached from his cheeks.

It was a lonely place, the moon. Who would save this boy, if not Shang Qinghua?

In the end Shang Qinghua overcame his instincts, just as he had that snowy day so long ago when things had been much hairier. Though he still trembled, he crept back to the crumpled figure shrouded in moondust.

There was no danger here, Shang Qinghua told himself firmly. No starving man to feed, no campfire to throw himself upon. There was only a dying, unconscious boy.

Whoever had dumped him here was long gone. They'd gone in a hurry, or else just hadn't cared enough to lay him out properly; the boy was curled half on his side, his legs wrenched to the side in a way that bode ill for his hips.

He looked so young. Too young.

Shang Qinghua sighed.

The boy was still dying, only now, he was dying upon Shang Qinghua's nice wooden floor as Shang Qinghua himself dithered and fretted and paced around him, tugging at his ears with his paws. This was very bad, very very bad.

But the pot was already cracked beyond repair. Why not just smash it entirely? Mind made up, he hopped to his table and took out the last immortality pill he'd made just before his ill-fated walk, and shaved a few slivers off, enough to thinly coat the pad of his finger.

Shang Qinghua half expected to be struck down by divine lightning the instant he brought a knife down on the pearly pill, but the heavens remained still. Even when he pried open the boy's mouth to smear his finger's precious cargo across his tongue, and when he gently massaged his throat to encourage him to swallow. Not a single rumble from above.

Even when the boy began to recover over the next few days, when it was clear that he would not be dying, the heavens remained silent, though Shang Qinghua's shoulders ached from curling inwards with nervous dread.

Even when the boy's eyes opened and he glared at Shang Qinghua, demanding to know where he was and where his sword was, nothing arced out of the sky to kill them both, so Shang Qinghua finally relaxed.

The heavens had proved merciful, praise the Celestial Emperor. The boy, on the other hand, is not.

"Sword? What sword?"

"My sword," the boy says, eyebrows dashing downwards. He reaches his hand to his side, and frowns even more when he touches only bedding.

"You didn't have anything on you but your clothing when I picked you up," Shang

Qinghua says.

"That's not possible," the boy says immediately, narrowing his eyes, "It never leaves my side."

"You know, for someone who was on death's—uh, pretty hurt, you're full of demands," Shang Qinghua says, correcting himself hastily, "and as to where you are, you're on the moon!"

"Impossible," the boy says immediately.

"Well, you are, so it's definitely possible," Shang Qinghua says.

"I can't be here," the boy says.

"Where should you be then?"

"Obviously," the boy says, looking at Shang Qinghua like he was stupid for asking. "I—"

Shang Qinghua fiddles with his paws, watching with interest as the boy turns an interesting color, opening and closing his mouth like one of the little fishes that came up to the surface of the pond next to the burrows back on earth when it rained. "Well?" he says, when it's quite clear the boy isn't going to speak again on his own.

"I...don't know." The boy says. "I can't remember." Horror flashes across his face before he takes a breath and his face smooths over.

"Well, that sure is a pickle," Shang Qinghua says, not altogether surprised. "You did hit your head pretty hard."

The boy looks at him, suspicious. "I did?"

"Yeah," Shang Qinghua says. "Well, probably. You had a head wound."

Suddenly, the boy's off the bed and standing defensively, his back to the wall. "How do

I know you're not the one who hurt me?"

"Are you kidding me," Shang Qinghua says indignantly. "First of all, I saved your life! If I wanted to kill you, I could've just left you out there and let you freeze to death at night, if the bleeding didn't drain you first. Also, I'm a rabbit? What do you expect me to do, kick you to death?"

"On the moon with a rabbit," the boy says faintly, suddenly quite pale. "I must be dreaming." Swaying, he crashes forward and slams onto the floor with an impressive thunk.

"Really now. Of all the things!" Shang Qinghua says, exasperated.

The boy doesn't wake again until late the next day.

Shang Qinghua sets down his mortar when he hears rustling from the bed, and hops over. "How do you feel?" he asks anxiously.

"Fine," the boy says flatly. "What happened?"

"You passed out," Shang Qinghua says, eyeing the bruise on his forehead. Even his hair, loose and hanging in his face, can't hide it entirely. "Are you sure you feel okay?"

"I am fine," the boy says stiffly.

"Right," Shang Qinghua says skeptically. "Then, do you remember anything else?"

"I don't know." The boy says, frowning, "Maybe."

"What's your name?" Shang Qinghua says.

The boy goes still. After a moment, he shakes his head.

"Why do you have a sword?"

Another shake.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

The boy goes to shake his head again, but then he pauses. His fingers twist in the sheets, and his eyes go distant. "Pain," he says. "And I was angry. So...angry. My sword was stuck, and it took too much effort to pull it out..."

"Happens to the best of us!" Shang Qinghua says brightly, "Why just last week my knife wouldn't come out of the chopping board, it was such a bother, but I got it out in the end, so no harm no foul really, if I say so myself—"

"...Of a body. A man," the boy finishes, watching him closely.

And well. That's...well. The admission itself is unsurprising; anyone who has a sword surely uses it. It would be strange if not, even if this boy is quite young.

"You're quite the dangerous young master, aren't you?" Shang Qinghua says, laughing nervously, privately quite glad he hadn't found his sword with him—or, with this guy's temperament, he would've been long since run through in his very own home!!!

"Yes," the boy agreed. His eyes flashed. "Will you have me leave?"

"Over that? No. It's not like you stabbed *me*. Besides, there's nowhere else for you to go," Shang Qinghua says reasonably, glad his ears are behind his head. If they tremble, the boy can't see anyway. "I don't have a way to leave, and I'm the only one who lives here. Anyway, since I saved your life, it would be rude to harm me in return, right?"

The boy nods, though he looks a little begrudging. He looks around Shang Qinghua's cozy cottage with a faint look of disgust. "I suppose I have to," he says.

"Well, nameless young master, I know it's not much, but you'll just have to put up with me and my home until either you remember yourself or someone comes for you."

The look on the boy's face is enough to make Shang Qinghua laugh, but he chews his lip and with a great effort, holds it back.

The boy spends most of his first week sleeping. The immortality elixir may have saved his life, but nearly dying takes a lot out of anyone.

It's just as well. It takes about that long for Shang Qinghua to reconcile himself to the idea of losing his cozy one person world. He sulks a lot. He spends many hours reading his novels, peeking furtively over the top at the still body in his bed, then creeping over to check that he's still breathing.

The boy sleeps like a corpse! Shang Qinghua has never been so stressed since his first encounter with the Emperor.

By the time the boy wakes for good, Shang Qinghua is a mess of nerves, but he scrapes himself together and tries for a smile. By the way the boy eyes him, he's not entirely successful.

"I'm hungry," the boy declares when he finally manages to stay awake for longer than ten minutes, and stares expectantly.

When Shang Qinghua prepares him food, however, he stares at the bowl disgusted.

"What is this," he says.

"Vegetables from my garden!" Shang Qinghua says proudly. "I just harvested the cucumbers yesterday—"

"No," the boy says, turning away.

"No?"

"No."

It was a lonely place, the moon.

Now it is not, and Shang Qinghua misses his peace greatly.

For the very first time since he'd been installed here by the Emperor himself and taken on his sacred duty, he's fallen behind schedule, but he hardly has time to work between every little thing the boy wants or needs. Often, those things seem to be the same.

Even though he doesn't remember anything, the boy behaves like a prince, and demands to be served as such. Shang Qinghua pins his ears back, ready to argue, but the memory of red on gray, so *so* much red, stops his tongue. He glances guiltily at the shock of white hair now prominently dashed through the boy's hair, and sighs.

"How about rice?" he offers. "I can do rice, I have some pickled green beans that go wonderfully with rice!"

"...Fine," the boy says. "Hurry. I am starving."

"So imperious!" Shang Qinghua mutters, busily unearthing the beans. "Why, even the Emperor himself was not so demanding... grumble grumble..."

Shang Qinghua would be more upset, should be more upset, but the brat cries at night when he thinks Shang Qinghua is asleep. Even if he had managed to sleep through it (he does not), in the mornings,

the air tastes like salt. It really puts a damper on everything! How is Shang Qinghua supposed to start the day off right when he's being choked by all this misery!

Three nights in a row of this and Shang Qinghua sighs, crawling out of the nest of soft blankets he'd made for himself atop his couch and onto the bed he'd ceded. He curls cautiously against the boy's side, who stiffens at his touch. Shang Qinghua doesn't notice, too busy kicking his feet, satisfied. Ah, his bed! His bed!!! So much more comfortable than the couch! Oh how he'd missed his bed!!!

He falls asleep sooner than he means to, being so comfy and cozy, and wakes a little damp along his back. The warmth of his furry form, the weight of it, seems to help.

His fur is drier and drier every night, though the boy holds him closer and closer.

It's...nice.

Shang Qinghua had forgotten what it feels like to sleep in a tangle of soft, warm, wriggling bodies. The young master doesn't move much in his sleep, nor is he as furry as Shang Qinghua's kin, but his hair is long and falls over Shang Qinghua like silk; his hands against his belly are warm, and his breaths soft puffs against Shang Qinghua's limp ears.

He's a good boy. Very nice.

At least, when unconscious. Shang Qinghua almost likes him then.

Awake, the Young Master is a horrible little brat. He demands meat. He hardly eats. He commands Shang Qinghua like a little lord.

The sheets aren't soft enough, the cottage too damp, the fire too hot, the broth too cloudy.

Shang Qinghua glowers, paws flexing. He considers...

Across from him, the boy is frowning down at his soup, the skin beneath his eyes faintly bruised. "I want meat," he says again.

"You can have it when you're home again," Shang Qinghua says, one deep breath later. "I don't have any and I won't ask for it."

"You must," the Young Master says imperiously.

Shang Qinghua's eye twitches. His ear twitches. His everything twitches.

"No I don't," he says. "I'm a rabbit and I don't eat meat. Also, there's nothing I must do beyond to reach my quota, which, may I remind you, my dear young master, thanks to your arrival, I am in danger of not meeting for the first time ever. You might not remember the Emperor, but I assure you he is terrifying when upset! Or disappointed! Or evenly just mildly inconvenienced! If you don't want to see me reduced to meat paste, don't make things so difficult for me. Please!"

And then, because his—everything is still twitching, Shang Qinghua stomps over to his workstation, his own bowl of soup left to go cold.

The Young Master goes quiet. A little while later, he joins him, sorting herbs silently.

"I'm still growing," the boy suddenly says, after several shichen have passed and Shang Qinghua is well and absorbed in his work.

"That's good," Shang Qinghua says absently, focused on grinding the paste just right.

"So, if I don't eat properly, I won't grow well," the Young Master says.

Shang Qinghua gets an idea of where he's

going with this. "My vegetable garden is excellent," he says slowly.

"If my growth is stunted, it will be your fault," the Young Master continues, firm. "Entirely."

"My fault?" Shang Qinghua repeats, paws going to his hips. "Have you considered that it could be your parents? Your ancestors? Maybe you were never meant to be tall in the first place."

The Young Master stills. "My parents," he says woodenly.

Damn it, Shang Qinghua thinks. Fuck. "I'll put in a request for next month," he says hastily. The Young Master doesn't look like he's even heard him.

"I-Look," Shang Qinghua continues hastily. "I was saying nonsense. What parents? You can grow tall if you try! What came before you doesn't always determine your future. Look at me, I was just an ordinary rabbit! Work hard."

"Mn," The Young Master says, coming out of that alarming stillness that had settled onto him like a cloak. He looks thoughtful. "I will."

The Young Master practices his forms every morning and night, using a walking stick Shang Qinghua had first used when he attained his human form in place of a sword.

Eventually, he begins to help Shang Qinghua with his pill making, sorting herbs, cleaning the shaping molds, everything Shang Qinghua doesn't want to do.

He reads the books Shang Qinghua has laying around, though not the ones he had Shen-ge personally put in his monthly supplies. Those are under his bed, where the boy never looks. Even as helpful as he's become now, it's still clear he's never thought about housekeeping a day in his life.

He eats what Shang Qinghua cooks, less reluctantly now that he knows meat is coming.

He also roams the moon, searching for his sword, convinced it's out there somewhere, though Shang Qinghua has told him again and again that there was nothing with him, no long sharp pointy thing! He swears!

And sometimes—sometimes—Shang Qinghua will look up from where he's chopping carrots for sauteing, and notice the boy looking out of the window, and something about the way he holds himself makes Shang Qinghua's paws tremble.

The planes of his young face so harsh, his cheeks unforgiving, like seaside cliffs that birds dive off of. The silence that hangs over his shoulder is sharp like a knife.

He's had a hard enough time of it already, so young. Shang Qinghua can barely remember what it was like to be that young anymore, but still. He's not a child, though his cheeks still carry the faint roundness of childhood, but to Shang Qinghua, he may as well be. He should be tumbling in the fields, gnawing carrots too often, enjoying the wild clover—or whatever the human equivalent is, anyway.

Shang Qinghua may be perfectly happy here, but what about the young master?

He shakes his head, resuming his work. It's useless to wonder when he knows the answer. Sometimes Shang Qinghua looks up from his cooking and catches sight of himself in the reflection of the window instead.

Sometimes it feels like seeing a ghost; the sight of himself is so unfamiliar. An ordinary rabbit, brown like wood, like dirt, now glowing white like the purest jade. The bustling days of his childhood warren are distant in his memory. Now, rather than a rabbit, he lives more like a hare—he thinks ruefully. He tugs at his ears. No one who looks at him would mistake him for anything other than a rabbit, all soft face and dense coat.

He sighs.

"Mobei."

"Bless you," Shang Qinghua says, flipping a page by nudging it with his elbow as he mashes leaves down in his mortar.

"That is my name," the boy says stiffly.

Shang Qinghua mashes a little more before the words catch up to him. He sets the pestle down with a *thonk*, and stares at the boy—Mobei. "Really?" he says, leg thumping excitedly. "You remembered!"

"Obviously," Mobei says.

Shang Qinghua is too elated to care.

"Yes!" he cheers, bouncing around the room exuberantly. He grabs Mobei's hands and whirls him along in circles. Caught off

guard, Mobei joins him for the first few revolutions before he pulls himself free. Nonplussed, Shang Qinghua continues on his own. "Your memory's coming back! Today your name, tomorrow who you are, the day after where you should be!" With a whoop, Shang Qinghua launches himself up into the air, twisting in a spectacular roll before he plops down on the bed, smiling—smiling.

Mobei exhales. "Maybe," he says, looking just as disdainful as usual, but his shoulders loosen. It may as well be a scream of excitement coming from him, and Shang Qinghua doesn't miss it.

They're in the vegetable garden, Mobei loosening the earth for Shang Qinghua to sow seeds when someone calls, "Qinghua!"

Mobei pushes Shang Qinghua behind him, who yelps, seeds flying.

"What are you doing," Shang Qinghua says reproachfully, "now we're going to have tomatoes coming up everywhere! Who's here?" He pushes at his shoulder, but Mobei does not move.

"Be still," Mobei says.

"That's—oh, he's not a danger to us," Shang Qinghua says. "He's the—He's a friend."

"Hello!" a man says, smiling. His robes are simple but fine, and several boxes float down the path behind him. He notices Mobei then, and pauses. "Now, who's this young man," he asks. "Did he fall from the sky?"

"Basically," Shang Qinghua says. "Mobei,

this is my dear friend Qingqiu. He's an imperial advisor, you know, very important job." He waves his hands around vaguely, all of his attention on the other man's voluminous sleeves. "Did you bring it?"

"Of course," Shen Qingqiu replies, reaching into his left and extracting a discreet package, wrapped tightly and tied with twine. Shang Qinghua takes it and tucks it under his arm, ignoring Mobei's curious look.

"Great," he says. "How are they?"

"Oh, excellent. Really good stuff this time around, there's this new guy..."

"Hold on," Shang Qinghua interrupts. "Mobei, run ahead and start the tea, please. Pick a sweet one."

"Are you sure it's fine," Mobei says, turning his head to meet Shang Qinghua's ear, but rendering it useless by hardly lowering his voice at all.

"Yes, yes," Shang Qinghua says. "Qingqiu's my oldest friend. Don't worry. I have more to worry about with *you*." He taps his nose playfully, and Mobei snorts, but obediently takes his leave at last after one last, "Call if you need help."

"Really," Shang Qinghua says after he goes, shaking his head. "He's always so much to handle..."

"Qinghua," Shen Qingqiu interrupts. "Do you know who he is?"

"Mobei? Oh, well, not exactly," Shang Qinghua says. "He's lost his memory."

"And how did he come to live with you?" Shen Qingqiu says.

"Well, so here's the thing..." Shang Qinghua begins.

"...And so—actually, if you know anything, or if you can ask around discreetly, I would be most grateful."

"There's something familiar about him," Shen Qingqiu says. "But I can't remember it just now. When I do, I'll let you know."

"Please do," Shang Qinghua says. "Now, what you were saying about a new guy? Does he write better than me?"

By the time they've seen Shen Qingqiu off and done all the planting, Mobei's coated in mud all the way to midthigh and Shang Qinghua's coat is plastered to his skin and twice as heavy.

"This calls for a good soaking," Shang Qinghua says, heaving himself out of the row of what will be carrots in a few short months with a satisfied sigh. "Follow me."

"I need to relieve myself," Mobei says, hesitating.

"That's fine," Shang Qinghua says, already starting down the path up the hill. "Just come along this way when you're done, you can't miss it." He doesn't wait for Mobei to respond.

By the time he hears footsteps drawing near, Shang Qinghua's already in the water, hair spreading loose in the water. "Come in quick," he says without opening his eyes. "The water's perfect."

He hears a soft thump, then a colossal splash, and Shang Qinghua inhales an unfortunate amount of water as he struggles to regain his footing. "What on earth," he demands, spluttering, "just happened—Mobei?"

Mobei, red-faced, scrambles out of the spring, entirely clothed and dripping wet from head to foot.

"Are you alright?"



"You," Mobei says. "Who are you?"

"Have you hit your head?" Shang Qinghua says, honestly concerned, coming forward to probe his temples. "Who else could it be? Is there a third creature on the moon that I don't know about?"

"You are not a rabbit," Mobei says faintly, one hand outstretched to ward him off. It's entirely unnecessary. Shang Qinghua is so indignant he stops in his tracks.

"How dare you! I absolutely am!" he says.

Mobei just looks at him.

"This is just my alternate form," Shang Qinghua finally says, defensively. "This spring is too deep for my natural form. It's more convenient like this."

Mobei says nothing.

"Aiya, you think too much," Shang Qinghua says, sitting back down with a huff, resting his arms along the lip of the spring. "Sometimes rabbits become men. It's the immortal realm! Surely there are stranger sights than a human form? Did you never go outside?"

Mobei says nothing.

A few more ignored words later and Shang Qinghua gives up on coaxing him, and lets his head fall back too, staring up at the cosmos.

In doing so, he misses Mobei's burning stare, though he does start feeling a little warm around the neck. Shang Qinghua's ears twitch a little, but he doesn't get up. After all, it's so hot in here! Instead, he levers one leg out of the water until his toes are pointed to the skies, and water funnels down what seems like miles of shapely calf and thigh back into the pool.

"I'm finished soaking," Mobei suddenly says, before retreating hastily. "I am going back first."

"Are you sure you got all the mud off?" Shang Qinghua calls after him. "Did you check behind your ears?"

No response.

Shang Qinghua rolls his eyes. "I can't understand him," he

mutters. "Maybe he really did hit his head."

"I have intruded on your kindness for too long," Mobei says that night when they're getting ready for bed, something oddly stiff in his demeanor—and that's saying

something, considering how stiff he always

Shang Qinghua peers at him suspiciously.

"Did you spill something on the bedding?"

"What? No!" Mobei says, eyebrows twitching.

"Then why are you trying to run away?"

"I am not *running away*," Mobei says. "There is nothing wrong with your bed. I am moving to the couch. I should not have imposed for so long."

"Hmmm..." Shang Qinghua says, hopping over to it. After thoroughly smelling the whole thing, he straightens. "Alright then," he says. "Suit yourself! Don't come back in the middle of the night when you change your mind!"

"I will not," Mobei promises.

Shang Qinghua hmphs. He climbs onto the bed and sits down. A moment passes. Mobei is still standing beside it. His eyes flicker.

"Do you need help laying out a blanket for the couch?" Shang Qinghua asks. "Or if you've already changed your mind, I suppose I'll let you join me again," he continues magnanimously. "Even though you made such a fuss!" "I do not and did not," Mobei says.

Shang Qinghua tsks. "Suit yourself." Still, he doesn't lay down until he watches Mobei settle himself in a few swift movements.

"Well, goodnight," Shang Qinghua says from under the blanket, into the dark. He curls up tighter. Strange. It feels a little cold tonight.

"Goodnight," Mobei says.

Time tumbles by like the most mischievous of kits.

Shang Qinghua learns to cook meat and sprawls out across his bed and greets Shen Qingqiu every month with a watchful shadow at his back.

Eventually, he forgets. Blood on dust has long been replaced by ripe tomatoes dropped and splattered. The dying boy lives.

Well, rabbits are like that. Their lives don't stretch on, and neither do their memories.

It's a day like any other when it finally happens. It's close to the end of the month, and Shang Qinghua is busy as he always is this close to his deadline. His fur is sticking every which way and he's running on empty.

When Mobei comes in from outside, he doesn't even look up. Not even when he



speaks. And so Shang Qinghua does not see how Mobei looks when he says, "I remember."

"You do?" Shang Qinghua says, nose twitching, sorting through the last of the herbs for the month. "That's good, because I don't. Hurry, hurry, let's go plant them. Any later and they won't fruit properly this fall!"

"No, not the seeds," Mobei says, his eyes dark with old pain. "How I arrived here. It was my uncle. He has stolen my birthright and I must go claim it."

"What?" Shang Qinghua says, pausing in his search. He peers up at him, nose twitching as he works to process. "But, if he's the reason you ended up here," he says slowly, "then he killed—nearly killed you," he corrects hastily. "If you go, it'll be the same thing all over again." His tail wiggles uncomfortably. He stills it with an effort. It's a necessary falsehood. If Mobei's uncle is truly ruthless enough to kill a child related to him by blood, what will he do to a man who survived the impossible?

"Even so," Mobei says emotionlessly, "I have to go."

"How will you even get back home?" Shang Qinghua says angrily. "I don't have any power to transport you anywhere!"

"Now that I remember where to go, and who I am," Mobei says, "it is of no concern." He flicks his fingers and—before Shang Qinghua's disbelieving eyes—the still air in the little house shivers and parts, like a gaping wound. A portal.

"But..." Shang Qinghua says weakly, "Just because you can doesn't mean you should."

"I must," Mobei says. He lets his hand fall, and the portal closes. The air feels too

quiet now, and Shang Qinghua squirms in his seat. Finally, Mobei speaks again: "I will leave as soon as possible."

Shang Qinghua's eyes fly up to his face. The man looks resolute, like he's perfectly ready to depart before he draws another breath.

"Absolutely not," he says firmly. "You will do nothing before a good night's sleep. And I have to pack for you."

Shang Qinghua packs him snacks. He even slips in a novel that ends happily, with the main character hale and hearty and settled back in his childhood village. Even if Mobei has no time to read it, maybe the end will be enough to draw him back, like a dove seeking its roost. Lastly, he tucks in a battered little wooden box. Before he ties up the bundle, he opens it to check its contents one last time. Touching the white ball, as smooth as a pearl and twice as luminescent, he nods.

"Qinghua?" Mobei says. "I have to go."

"Okay," Shang Qinghua says, closing the box and putting it deep inside the bag. The Emperor will understand, he hopes. And even if he does not, Shang Qinghua will bear what punishment he hands down with silent grace.

"If you—If you're in danger," Shang Qinghua says, tugging the hem of his sleeve. "I left something for you. If you...If you think you're not coming back, eat it. If you want."

"I know," Mobei says. But instead of leaving immediately, he hesitates. "Thank you for your care, all these years."

"En," Shang Qinghua says froggily, turning away, waving his paw. "Hurry, hurry. Be safe."

"Yes," Mobei says. "Goodbye."

The air falls open, and he steps through.

Shang Qinghua, the silly rabbit, stands and watches the scuffed dust where his foot had last landed, and cries until his eyes swell like the tomatoes, and then he cries some more when he thinks of that.

So the moon is empty again.

Shang Qinghua still has his snacks, his novels, and his task, but he is no longer happy.

The years pass slowly when they used to fly by.

Shang Qinghua is praised by the Emperor for his diligence, for how he always surpasses his quota. He accepts the praise numbly. Like an automaton, he rises everyday to pound herbs, to pinch them into balls, to pack them and send them off.

The first month after Mobei leaves, he opens the provisions shipment and sobs over the package of meat. He pitches it over the horizon and leaves it to rot, then spends the rest of the month castigating himself—because what if Mobei returned the next day, and there was nothing for him to eat?

Every month after that, he stores the meat properly. Just in case—just in case.

In the early years, he often finds himself turning to dead air with a smile on his lips, a question, a joke. He turns down the bed neatly, and waits for a disdainful remark that never comes.

He takes to human form and sprawls out in bed at night, and still the house feels too empty.

He curls up small in his original form in bed every night and still the house is so cold. It hadn't been like this before.

Sometime into the fourth year, he starts writing again. And for the first time, it's not

a love story.

He picks up his pen, and looks up at the window. A windstorm is raging outside, and visibility is poor. In the swirling moondust, he sees a boy. A boy who becomes a man, a boy who fights and fights and wins. A boy who comes home.

"The bookshops won't take any more chapters," Shen Qingqiu tells him. "They say no one ever buys them anyway."

"Qinghua? Did you hear me?"

"Hello??"

Shang Qinghua finally looks up, bleary eyed and ink smudged. "What?"

"They don't want your—" Shen Qingqiu sighs. "Nevermind."

"Okay," Shang Qinghua says, and looks back down. "See you next month."

"Yeah," Shen Qingqiu says. "See you. You still want the meat?"

"Yes," Shang Qinghua replies, and Shen Qingqiu snorts.

"So *now* you can hear me," he says, fan snapping open with a loud *thwap*.

"Bye," Qinghua says, waving vaguely.

Shen Qingqiu goes, fan fluttering viciously in his hand.

Late one night, Shang Qinghua hears something tapping against the door. Dust storms, sometimes, send stray rocks clattering through the air, enough to bump against the walls of his home.

He hasn't left the house in a few days. His hair is unkempt, hanging limply around his ears, slick and greased. He hasn't been grooming himself.

But the thumping continues, and too regularly for it to be a natural phenomenon.

Shang Qinghua sets his mortar aside, grumbling, and goes to the door at last, wrenching it open, expecting nothing. "See?" he says to himself, "There's nothing...there..."

"Qinghua," says a man. He looks like he wants to say something else, but doesn't.

Shang Qinghua gapes. The man is tall, taller than himself, and broad. His hair is a pure fall of white, from root to tip. His face looks cold. Everything about him does, actually. Only his eyes are searingly, intensely alive.

"My delivery isn't due for another two weeks," he manages. "But you're not bringing it, are you? What are you doing here?"

No one had ever come to harass him before. Shang Qinghua tries to remember the forms in the self defense book. Right leg dragon stance, should be where you put your right leg forward, your left bent, hands held out. Mumbling, Shang Qinghua assumes the position as best as he can remember.

"Whatever you want, I don't have it," Shang Qinghua says nervously, trying to sound firm. "So you should just go away. Sorry!" Belatedly, he realizes how there are no silver ingots buried here he sounds, and sighs.

"Really!" he adds. "I live a very simple life. I don't have much. It's not worth bothering me."

"It is I, Mobei," the man says frostily. "I said I would return after I dealt with my uncle, and I have."

"Oh," Shang Qinghua says faintly. "Is that so! I see. Well. You look. Well." Mobei looks extremely good. His robes are nicely styled and made from expensive fabric and his tongue flashes gold.

Shang Qinghua looks down, surprised. Long, callused fingers grip the edges of his threadworn sleeve. "Gege," Mobei says, as easily as snow melt flows south each spring.

"Uh," Shang Qinghua says dumbly. "Come in."

Mobei does, and he doesn't let go of Shang Qinghua's sleeve.

For the first time since Shang Qinghua moved in, the cottage feels small—and it's all because of Mobei. Just standing there, he takes up so much room. His presence...it reminds Shang Qinghua of the Emperor's. Though not as strong of course! Not as strong! But, but...nearly.

He shakes his head, shedding his thoughts like so much dust, and looks up.

Mobei is watching him.

"You must be tired from all that traveling," Shang Qinghua says, even though he's sure Mobei got here through a portal like the one he'd left through. "How about a soak? I was just about to go myself."

"I would like that," Mobei says, unblinking.

"Oh good," Shang Qinghua says, mentally patting himself on the back. "Good good. Good." He clears his throat. "Uh, then. Shall

we go?"

"Yes," Mobei says.

Shang Qinghua turns his head when he hears a splash. "Oh!" he says. "You startled me."

"Sorry," Mobei says. He slips his other leg into the water, and Shang Qinghua—not meaning to—sees it all. The length of him, heavy weighed against his thigh, the rippling expanse of his torso, so much broader now. The scars that chewed up his sides, by his heart.

When he looks up, up, up, past the soft brown of his nipples, past his collarbones, his throat, his chin—he finds Mobei staring calmly back at him.

Shang Qinghua panics. "Scars!" he says loudly, then berates himself soundly for it. Why should he be panicking? Wasn't it just a body? Didn't he have one too? Even if it was soft and slender and slim, nothing like the corded muscle packed onto Mobei's frame.

"Scars?" Mobei says mildly. He's waist deep in the water now.

"Yours," Shang Qinghua says. "They're new," he adds intelligently.

"Yes," Mobei says. He doesn't say anything else. He doesn't submerge himself any further either, so Shang Qinghua looks around elsewhere desperately, casting about for something else to say.

But Mobei speaks first, "Do you still remember when I got into the springs for the first time?"

"Of course!" Shang Qinghua says, already smiling at the memory. "You fell in, clothes and all, and nearly drowned us both. It was so unlike you to lose your balance like that, I was so surprised."

"I fell in then," Mobei says slowly, "because I was looking at you. At your body. And it was so beautiful I couldn't see anything else."

"Ah," Shang Qinghua says, still smiling. A minute goes by. Water drips from his temples down into the main pool. "Ah?" His heart rate picks up as he stares wide-eyed up at Mobei. A flush spreads from his cheeks down his body, painting his pale shoulders like a peach.

Mobei meets his eyes calmly, then deliberately looks down, his piercing eyes lingering on what's visible of Shang Qinghua's chest and his collarbones, before traveling back up. "You still are."

Shang Qinghua is suddenly painfully aware of his nakedness—of his legs, bare, against each other, and how hot it is here. More liquid rolls down his throat and drops back into the spring, and he can't tell if it's sweat or water. "Thank you," he croaks.

Mobei inclines his head but he doesn't say anything else, and Shang Qinghua doesn't either. He just looks at him. Mobei is so pale, his shoulders so broad now. He'd known they were, of course, but it is somehow different without clothes.

After a few minutes, Mobei blinks, cat-slow, looking serene and content. Shang Qinghua, however, feels his breath picking up.

"You look flushed," Mobei observes. "I'll go prepare some tea for you. Don't stay here too long."

"I won't," Shang Qinghua promises, dazed. He wonders if Mobei is going to come towards—

And then Mobei does move, but not

towards him. He stands up and turns his back to climb out of the pool, and walks away still naked without looking back.

Shang Qinghua stares at his bare ass, at the glorious, unforgiving musculature, until he's out of sight. Then, after a moment, he sinks down into the spring all the way up to his eyes. He lets out a scream beneath the water, but the roiling bubbles do nothing to soothe him.

The shadow, the flash of something heavy between his legs, is seared into his mind. He's hot all over and it has nothing to do with the water.

"So I was thinking I'd prep stew," Shang Qinghua says, shoving the door to his cottage open and immediately stumbling, "for tomo—oh!"

Mobei is naked.

He's pale still, less pale by the glow of the fire he's stoking. He turns to look over his shoulder and his eyes are too dark to see.

"Done soaking?"

"Y-Yeah," Shang Qinghua says, recovering himself. "Ahem. Yes. I am. Thank you for building the fire back up," he says.

"Of course," Mobei says.

Shang Qinghua goes over to his bed and awkwardly stands over it, looking down. "I guess I can sleep on the couch," he finally decides. "We're a bit too big to share anymore, eh?"

Mobei—Mobei is too big. Shang Qinghua has not grown an inch since the day the Emperor lifted him above the clouds.

"I do not mind," Mobei says. For some reason, he is moving across the floor to the bed on his knees.

For some reason his chest is bare—still bare, and still wet.

Shouldn't the fire have taken care of that? Shang Qinghua wonders.

"I would like to sleep with gege again," Mobei says. "As we did before."

"W-Well," Shang Qinghua says, as Mobei comes to a stop just before him. "It'll be a squeeze, a tight"—he swallows—"a tight squeeze." He can't stop looking at all that skin. Mobei tilts his head and the motion sends a drop of water down his chest, racing directly for his nipple.

"I do not mind," Mobei repeats. He's coming closer.

Shang Qinghua swallows again.

"Oh," he says.

Mobei is so close now.

"Gege," Mobei says.

"Y-Yes?" Shang Qinghua answers, weakly.

"I missed you."

"Me too," Shang Qinghua replies, surprising himself a little with how vehemently he says it. "I-I thought about you a lot. Almost every day. If you were eating enough, how you were doing, if you were well. I hoped—I had hoped you wouldn't have to use thethe pill, but I see that you did. But that's okay, that's fine, that's what I gave it to you for, just-just in case, and I'm just so glad you came back—oh!" He blinks, liquid spilling down his cheeks.

And then there are hands on his face, tilting it down, and something cool soaking up his tears. It's Mobei, Shang Qinghua realizes. Mobei's hands and Mobei's tongue.

He opens his mouth to say something, but he's forgotten it all.

What comes out is a tremulous, "Mobei?"

"Mn," Mobei says. He licks his lips.

Shang Qinghua's eyes go to them, and stay there, stuck. "You—I—we—"

"Mn," Mobei says, and kisses him.

Shang Qinghua tastes salt, and somehow, it is sweet.

So they kiss. They kiss and kiss and kiss and then there's touching above the waist and that's all very nice—Mobei really is so big now, and feels just as good as he looks, and his hands, though calloused, are not unpleasantly rough against Shang Qinghua's tender skin—but then there's also this:

"Say it again," Shang Qinghua says, and Mobei, still on his knees, looks up at him—his eyes liquid smooth, and says roughly, "Gege."

Shang Qinghua groans and fists a handful of his hair bringing him close. "Gentle," he directs, then hisses, jerking backwards at the cool touch of Mobei's tongue. Undeterred, the other man follows his retreat, not letting him go.

And this:

Shang Qinghua has never been fucked before, but he's read enough novels at this point that he's fairly sure he knows how to do it better than a lot of people who *have*—so he lays himself down and spreads his legs and relaxes himself as best as he can and reaches for his hole, only for Mobei to catch his hand.

Shang Qinghua frowns. "What's wrong?"

Mobei looks down at him, considering. His face is still, but there's a little frown brewing between his eyebrows, so microscopic Shang Qinghua wonders if the man is even aware of it—but he reaches up with his other hand to smooth it out anyway, and as soon as he does, Mobei leans into his touch, untensing.

"Nothing," he says calmly. "But I want you to fuck me," And the crudeness of it is so shocking falling from his perfect, proper lips, that the meaning registers, again, again, again, late. When it does, it goes straight to Shang Qinghua's cock, and he's suddenly so hard it hurts.

"Okay," he says, swallowing—because he knows Mobei, and for him to say it like that must mean he's made up his mind. "Yes, okay."

Shang Qinghua sees god, or the Emperor (no, no, yuck), or someone, something, holy fuck because Mobei is just as cool here as his mouth is, and Shang Qinghua wonders if he could possible get frostbite if he just stayed seated long enough.

"Fuck," Mobei says, and moans. "Please." He's trembling, and so, so tight.

"Alright, alright," Shang Qinghua says soothingly. "I'm here. Do you need me to stop?"

"No," Mobei growls—growls! (Shang Qinghua shivers, delighted)—and Mobei sets a possessive hand on Shang Qinghua's hip. "I can take it," he says. "Just...go slowly. For a little."

"Okay," Shang Qinghua says, stroking his

Tu'er Shen

Tu'er Shen

hair soothingly. "I can do that."

He works himself out inch by inch—and honestly, this might even be making things worse, because holy, holy, god does it feel like torture, feeling Mobei stretch and cling to him eagerly.

And Mobei himself is making all of these little noises as he curls down over Shang Qinghua, caging him in.

Soft, so soft. His hair falls down onto Shang Qinghua's chest, tickling it gently as he moves.

"So good," Shang Qinghua says, dazed. "You feel so good."

"M-Mn," Mobei says. His eyes are a little unfocused.

"I-I'm going to move," Shang Qinghua says. He's a little shaky, and it's hard to press up, but Mobei helps and it's oh, oh, o—

And this:

Life goes on, and it's blissful.

The moon is not lonely. The moon is a two person world.

If the emperor himself showed up outside his door, Shang Qinghua would simply not answer it.

Especially not now, not after Mobei has pressed him into the garden and fucked him silly, and then unearthed him afterwards as gently as he would a stalk of green onion he'd sown himself.

Shang Qinghua has mud in his mouth and mud in his ears, but he's never been happier.

"So," Mobei says. "When will you come live with me?"

"What?" Shang Qinghua says.

"We have consummated our relationship. Before I journeyed here, I acknowledged you before my court. Surely the consort of the King of the Northern Mountains will not continue to live so far from our lands? From this king?"

"King," Shang Qinghua repeats. "King?"

"Yes," Mobei says. "You did not realize? I had thought it would be obvious."

"Just from your hair? Plenty of people have white hair! I have white hair! That doesn't make me king of the moon!"

"Well, I am king," Mobei says simply. "Will you come?"

"I... who said I wouldn't!" Shang Qinghua said, red, "I have to pack! And wash! I'm all muddy. I'm not leaving without getting in the hot spring one last time!!"

"I am not either," Mobei says, and hoists him up and into his arms.

"Mobei!" Shang Qinghua shrieks.

"I will not drop you," Mobei promises, and indeed, he never does.





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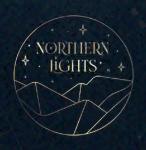
Graphics & Formatting

• cytaoplasm

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Thank you

for picking up Northern Lights!

We hope you've enjoyed all the different Moshangs that our talented contributors had to offer

We are very grateful to everyone for sticking with us through the ups and downs of this zine, we wouldn't have made it here without all the support and patience everyone has shown us.

-Northern Lights Mod Team

